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grand theft auto VI

EXPLORING THE BIGGEST GAME LEAK EVER

PREVIEW

HYENAS

SHOOT, LOOT, AND EXTRACT IN ZERO-G

SINS II OF A SOLAR EMPIRE®

CONQUER A SPRAWLING UNIVERSE

+ THE 15 BEST 4X STRATEGY GAMES ON PC

FIRST LOOK

THE GREAT WAR: WESTERN FRONT

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ISSUE 376

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"IT'S A WONDERFULLY INTRICATE SLICE OF STRATEGY"

One thing I love about PC gaming is detail. Our beloved platform is the undisputed home of simulation – whether it's modelling the complexities of an airplane cockpit, or the politics of a medieval royal court.

So how could I fail to be impressed by the ambition of *Sins of a Solar Empire II's* painstakingly crafted galaxy? Simulating everything from the orbital cycle of moons and planets, to the individual turrets on every space ship, it's a wonderfully intricate slice of strategy. Almost as wonderfully intricate as our in-depth cover feature on it.

ROBIN VALENTINE
Twitter
@robinlvalentine

This month
Simulated every individual finger on his hands to virtually type this sentence.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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SEE p56

The PC Gamer team

FRASER BROWN
Twitter
@FraserIBrown

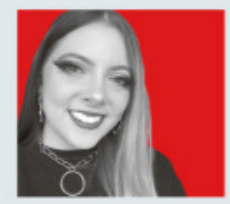
This month
Spent so long looking at *Sins II* that now he thinks reality is a bit lacking in features.

WES FENLON
Twitter
@wesleyfenlon

This month
Discovered why playing games at the wrong FOV is the same as eating rotten meat.

PHIL SAVAGE
Twitter
@Octaeder

This month
Experienced the grinding futility of the Great War. Bit like running a website.



MOLLIE TAYLOR
Twitter
@mollietayy

This month
Had some unkind words to say about a certain blue hedgehog. Hasn't he suffered enough?

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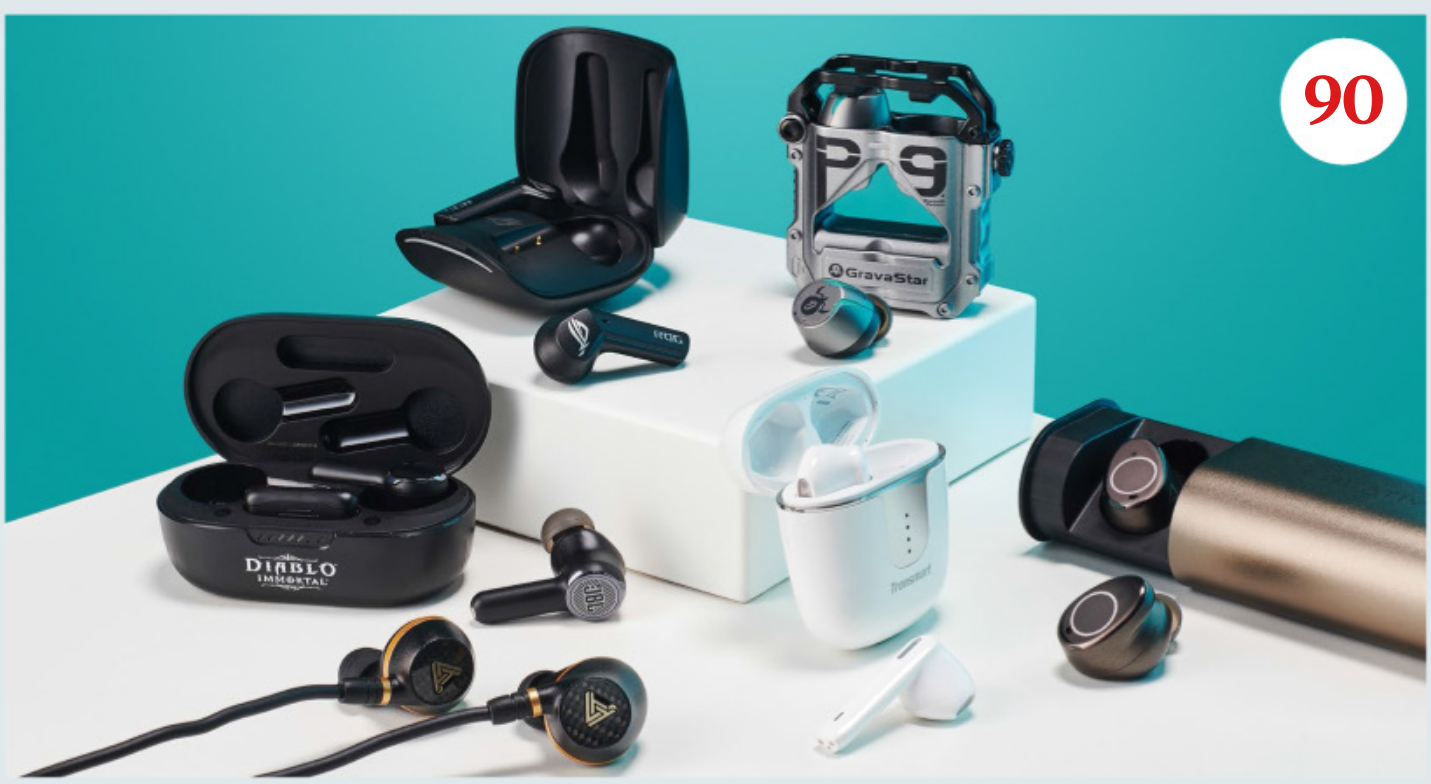
50 BEST 4X GAMES

We run down our favourite 4X games to play right now, whether you want to rule space, the ancient world, a fantasy realm, or all of human history.



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TWITCH REFLEX

Two of the world's biggest streamers choose wildly different paths

One of Twitch's most successful streamers has decided she's just not that into it anymore. After a month-long break, Imane 'Pokimane' Anys announced she will stream less and will focus on posting non-gaming content on other social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram. "I feel like other platforms fit into my lifestyle nowadays a little bit better," she said.

The 26 year old started streaming *League of Legends* in 2013 and is now one of the biggest creators on Twitch, but said she's lost her passion. "I hope it doesn't sound big-headed of me to say, but nowadays when I see things on Twitch, it kinda feels like 'been there, done that.'

"There's such a pressure on streamers to follow every trend, to capitalise on viewership, to stream longer than the guy next to them. It's just a hyper-competitive industry. But ultimately, the reason I say this is because I'm just at a point in my life that it doesn't feel creatively fulfilling to feed into that anymore."

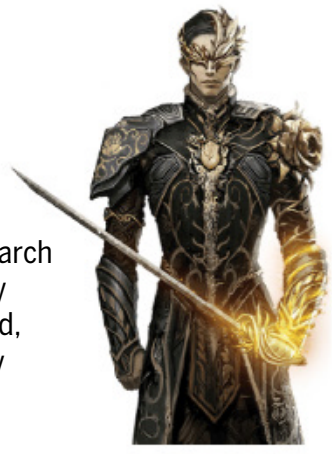
"IT DOESN'T FEEL CREATIVELY FULFILLING TO FEED INTO THAT ANYMORE"

It's unclear how the 9.2 million-follower streamer's exclusivity contract with Twitch will be affected by her new schedule, but it's probably not a massive hit to her bottom line: after all, she was able to turn down a $3 million sponsorship deal in 2020.

"When I wake up nowadays, I don't want to run to my PC and game for eight hours straight," she said, a sentiment that resembles comments from other career Twitch streamers who've come to resent the grind.

FALLEN FROM GRACE

BYE BYE, BABYLON



Platinum's online action RPG *Babylon's Fall* barely even got off to a start, launching in March 2022 to abysmal reviews and a paltry player count. It's now being shuttered, with the game running until February 27, 2023. So long *Babylon's Fall*, we barely knew ye. ■ ***MT***

LOTR MMO DOA

MATCH MADE IN MORDOR

We learnt why Amazon and Tencent's Lord Of The Rings MMO fell apart this month: it turns out the companies just couldn't get along. Amazon Games president Christoph Hartmann said the two titans were "too big as companies to really turn into partners". So Amazon dropped the whole thing. ■ ***JW***

NO MORE ETHER ORE

ETHEREUM MERGE

Finally the merge that's meant Ether no longer relies on proof-of-work has passed, and proof-of-stake is in. What that means is since Ether is one of the most prominent cryptocurrencies, we should see a massive downturn in crypto mining as well as energy usage, and more GPUs for us gamers! ■ ***KW***

TOP LEFT: Ninja faked-out his audience before the announcement, changing his social media profiles to say 'User Not Found'. He'd previously signed a multi-year exclusivity contract.

ABOVE: As well as streaming, Pokimane is also the co-founder of creator collective OfflineTV, and chief creative officer of the company that co-owns the EVO tournament.

NINJA'D

At the same time, another of the world's biggest streamers decided that Twitch wasn't enough. Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins dropped his exclusivity contract with the platform and plans to stream on all major platforms at the same time.

"When you sign an exclusivity contract, it's usually a big fat check that's tied to it. That's guaranteed money, that's sustainability, that's comfortable. But right now, I'm basically on my own," the multi-millionaire said while playing *Fortnite* on his first multi-stream.

In order to stream everywhere, he's opted out of allowing subscriptions entirely on the platform as a Twitch affiliate. Twitch released the restrictions on partners streaming to TikTok and Instagram last month, but they're still not allowed to broadcast on YouTube or Facebook – its two biggest rivals.

According to a leak of Twitch's internal records last year, only the top 0.015% of its streamers make a livable wage on the platform. Burnout and waning passion are common reasons for popular streamers taking breaks. Pokimane is fortunate to be able to step back from full-time streaming without fear of losing her audience but, for the millions who yearn for a fraction of her success, the grind continues. ■

Tyler Colp

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

AI AI
Jason Allen entered a fine arts competition with a piece of art he'd used AI to create and took first prize.

World Record
YouTuber DeanoBeano played *Warzone* using a recorder flute as a controller, and got headshots.

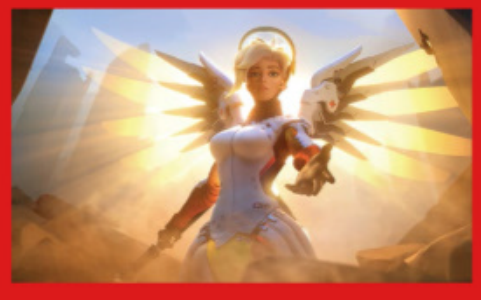
Friendly Territory
Bethesda is helping *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* fans keep the game alive by adding new servers.

Have Mercy
Blizzard has announced that *Overwatch 1* will no longer be playable from October 2.

Prey for him
Raphael Colantonio, director of 2017's *Prey*, says Bethesda forced the name on Arkane.

NF Thanks
"You could use people in the Philippines as real-life NPCs in your game," says blockchain consultant Mikhai Kossar, apparently seriously.

LOWS



BUSTED

GRAND THEFT AUTO VI is the target of the biggest leak in videogame history

The gaming world was set abuzz on September 18 when, out of the blue, roughly an hour of footage from *Grand Theft Auto VI* was leaked onto the internet. There were 90 different clips in all, many only a few seconds long, showing early development footage and game testing in debug mode. There were other, longer clips showing interior locations and some character dialogue. Rockstar has confirmed the footage is genuine, was the result of a "network intrusion" by a hacker, and says the leak will not affect the game's development schedule.

Rockstar and parent company Take Two then went after everywhere that was hosting the leak, temporarily forcing the closure of the *GTA* forum where it had originated as well as other communities re-hosting the material. PC Gamer cannot reproduce any of the leaked material.

But it reveals a lot about the next entry in Rockstar's flagship series, a game anticipated like no other. To be clear, the clips are mostly the kind of thing that will have been made for bug reports or animation tests: this isn't an hour of uninterrupted gameplay or a leaked reveal trailer.

STOLEN GOODS

The leak does, however, seem to confirm the persistent rumour that *GTA VI* will, for the first time in series history, feature a female protagonist. Two playable characters are shown in the leaked footage, one male and one female. Named Lucia and Jason, they even complete a mission together while robbing a diner, very Pulp Fiction, with the player controlling Lucia.

This doesn't tell us much about them, beyond suggesting some kind of Bonnie and Clyde style romance, though another clip shows the player switching between the two characters instantaneously in a hotel room (rather than the *Grand Theft Auto V* camera lift into the sky when switching). *GTA V* of course featured three characters, so there may well be more to come.

One longtime rumour looks to have been finally, definitely confirmed. One of the clips shows a rail car with 'Vice City Metro' painted on the side as Jason walks on and then exits. Vice City is of course the Rockstar version of Miami, so we're off back to Florida. In a series that has returned to locations like Liberty City (New York) and Los Santos (Los Angeles) it's perhaps not surprising that Vice City, two decades on, is now due for a return.

The footage doesn't tell us an awful lot about this version of Vice City, though. The locations shown are mostly generic looking places like city streets and a few building interiors. Only once is a small portion of the map shown, so we don't know how far outside of Vice City the world spreads. There are more rural locations shown, like a trailer park, and in a few clips the characters are standing on a boat or swimming in the ocean. We also see an airboat, the kind used in the Florida Everglades, though in the footage it's just sitting on some concrete.

With this return to Vice City comes the question of era: the original *Vice City* was set in the 1980s. Several clips from the leak, however, show pedestrians holding smart phones, with one appearing to take a selfie. The footage also references apps like LifeInvader (Facebook) and WhatUp! (WhatsApp) so yeah... this seems to be contemporary Miami.

Perhaps worth emphasising here is that, while Rockstar may be going back to Vice City, this is a very different Vice City. The original Vice City was based more on Miami Vice than Miami, and one of its appeals was the garish neon-soaked palette. And there are traces of that here, too, but this is a decidedly more realistic setting, with the pink signs offset by grim concrete and dirty streets.

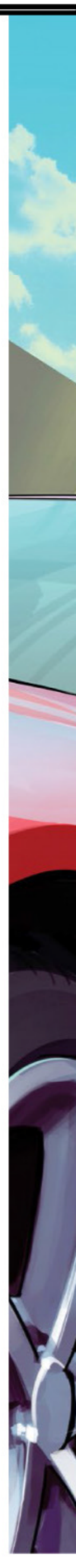
PRONE CALL

There are a few hints about new systems. One short clip shows a character on the ground in a prone position: but they begin to crawl. As they crawl through a doorway the character encounters a small box, and push it aside with their hand to clear the way. In *GTA V* characters can't go prone or crawl, but the game already has a bunch of stealth systems baked-in (even if most players prefer the Scarface approach).

So the *Grand Theft Auto VI* leak has confirmed some things but, and this is probably for the best, hasn't really spilled all the beans. There's plenty to speculate about, of course, and there's undoubtedly something of an illicit thrill at finally seeing a game we all knew existed when we're not supposed to.

As we go to press, the news has broken that the UK police have arrested a 17 year old on suspicion of involvement in both this hack and that of Uber. No charges have been brought as yet. ■

Chris Livingston, Rich Stanton



GRAND THEFT DETAILS

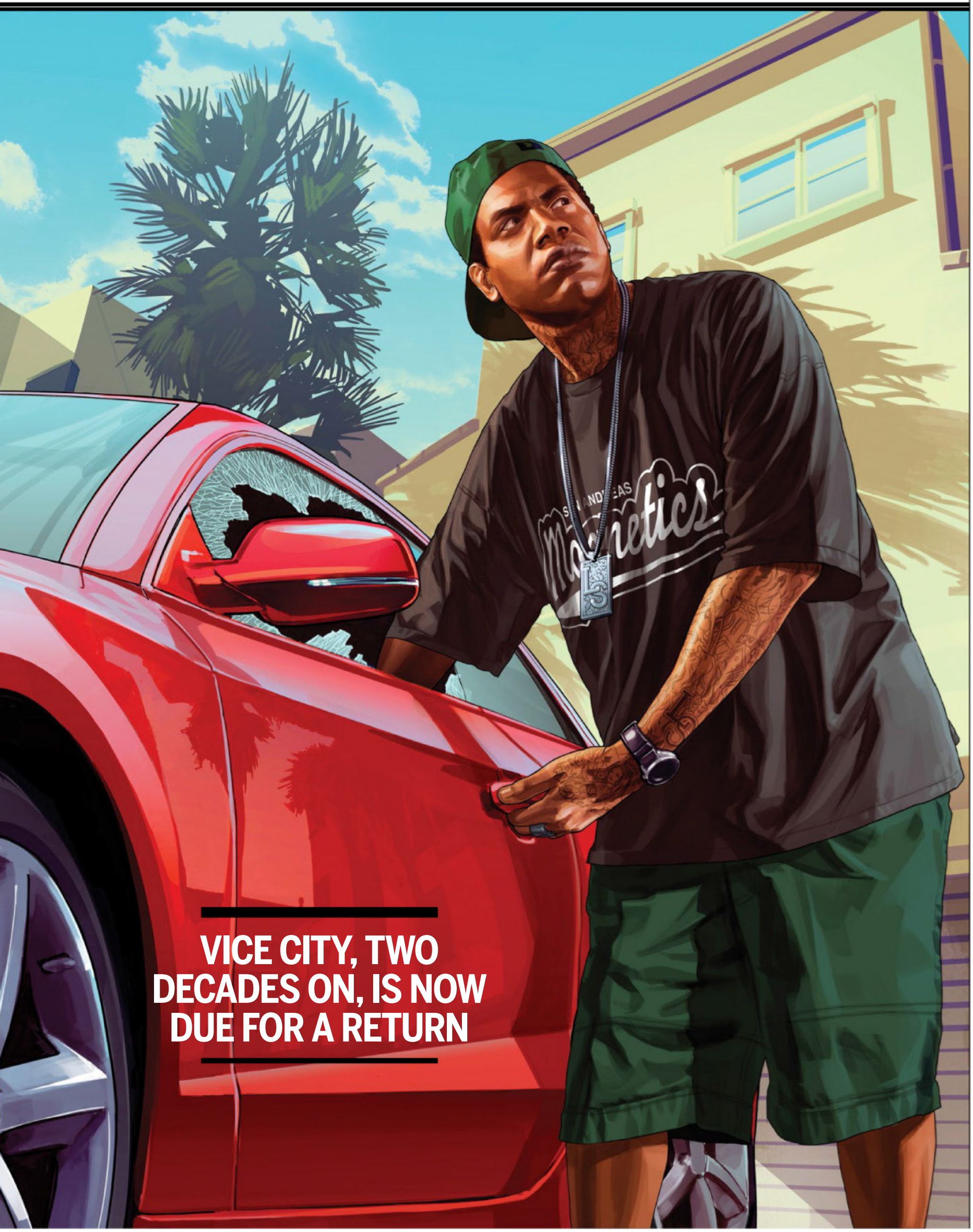
Cranking up the specula-tron over four tiny moments

1 CUSHION PHYSICS
One clip shows Jason unloading a gun into a ship's seat, and the fluff poofing out from the bullet holes is a technical marvel.

2 RELOAD!
While elements in these clips are obviously unfinished, Rockstar has clearly put a lot of work into new reload animations that do look spectacular.

3 DINER DASH!
Clearly a Pulp Fiction tribute, the diner scene also shows huge fidelity to what the interiors look like. This may be the most 'realistic' *GTA* yet.

4 STARTING OUT
In *GTA V*, the three protagonists are hardened criminals. Lucia and Jason don't have that vibe at all: they just seem to be street punks.



VICE CITY, TWO DECADES ON, IS NOW DUE FOR A RETURN

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY
The Spy suggests you just turn back and re-read the last page.

The Spy is furious. Apoplectic. Beside The Spy's self. The Spy has spent years covering the *GTA VI* beat, painstakingly documenting every scant titbit – taking care along the way to call out chancers offering up the mere pretence of news for a quick and dirty traffic win. It wasn't easy, you know. Do you know how many incoherent YouTube rants The Spy had to watch? But still, The Spy put in the work – the hard graft. And now, in the month where an actual, legitimate leak takes place, what does PC Gamer do? They give the news its own spread.

Excuse me? Is your existing, dedicated leaks and rumours page not up to the task? Is this humble, earnest reporter not prestigious enough to get a cover hit? "Oh, sorry, The Spy, we actually had to remove your page from the US edition because American readers found you weird and alienating – we got a lot of emails about it – so it was just easier to cover this separately." That's meant to make The Spy *feel better* is it?

Is The Spy at least OK to talk about the *Diablo IV* leaks, or have you got an eight-page feature on those lined up?

On the same day as *GTA VI*'s leak, footage also emerged showing around 40 minutes of *Diablo IV* test footage. It's thought to be from a private Discord stream that was recorded by one of its viewers. Should you find and watch the video, you will likely be struck by one overriding impression: yes, this is clearly a whole bunch of footage from an obviously unfinished game. There are still whitebox assets, NPCs use that robot text-to-speech voice, and the whole thing is heavily watermarked – no doubt making it pretty easy for Blizzard to hunt down the source of the leak.

Despite this, what's there does seem promising. Most of the video is questing and combat on a barbarian character, and the assets that *are* in place feel suitably grimy and foreboding. The Spy doesn't feel there's much point delving into the specifics of skills, talent trees, or UI choices, as these are all likely subject to change. At least this leak wasn't notable enough to justify wrestling it away from the page that exists solely to report on such things.

IS THE SPY AT LEAST OK TO TALK ABOUT THE DIABLO IV LEAKS?

REMASTERS REVEALED

While we're here and we've got nothing better to talk about, The Spy may as well touch in on the growing number of claims that a *Metal Gear Solid* remake series is in the works. That's fine, The Spy assumes. We don't have a full exposé planned for bloody Reinstall, do we?

VGC's Andy Robinson tweeted about Konami's planned Tokyo Game Show announcement of a new game from a series "loved all over the world" saying, "One publishing source told VGC that the reveal is likely to be related to a smaller project, rather than Konami's larger planned revivals for *Castlevania*, *Silent Hill,* and *Metal Gear Solid*." This turned out to be true: the reveal was for remasters of *Suikoden 1* and *2*. But veteran leaker AestheticGamer followed up, saying, "VGC talks about *Metal Gear Solid 1-3* remasters, new remastered version. I know that to be 100% true."

The Spy's really stoked that The Spy got to write that paragraph instead of covering the biggest leak of recent history. The Spy would like to remind PC Gamer's staff that The Spy was here before them, and The Spy will outlast them all. Spy out. ■

The Spy

This month in... 2012

1 "It's hard to imagine how *Minecraft* could become any bigger than it already is," writes Marsh as part of our two-part, ten-page cover feature on the indie megahit. It certainly was: *Minecraft* already felt like one of the biggest phenomena in PC gaming. And yet this was still two years before Microsoft spent $2.5 billion to acquire Mojang.

ISSUE
246, December 2012

ON THE COVER
Minecraft

IN THE CINEMAS
Taken 2

2 Two notable reviews this month. *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* gets a respectable 87%. *Dishonored* trumps it with 92%. "Gorgeous, complex and slick," writes Tom Francis.

3 Rounding out the issue's indie theme is a feature designed to help you get started making games. Specifically: what game engine should you pick? We asked developers of hit games in each popular engine – everything from Unreal, to Unity, to RPG Maker – to give a rundown of the respective pros and cons. No easy answers, but some fascinating insights.

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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

RIGHT ANGLES

Why an FOV slider is all that stands between you and a wave of nausea

In 2006, I got more headaches from *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* than I did from cramming for school exams. I played days upon days of *Oblivion*, but not on a PC – I was stuck on an Xbox 360, which was new and shiny but still barely capable of running Bethesda's new RPG. Every play session more than an hour gave me a dull headache, which I blamed on simply too much *Oblivion*. It wasn't until years later that I found forum threads online with people complaining about the same thing – and they blamed *Oblivion*'s field of view, or FOV, for giving them headaches or nausea.

But game developers will tell you: finding the right FOV is not as simple as it looks. "FOV is a bit of a tricky thing," says Sébastien Laurent, technical director at *Hunt: Showdown* developer Crytek. "It sounds straightforward at first, it's 'just' the angle of vision that you want to give the player. It seems to be a simple balance between providing the user all the relevant information all the while providing an image that looks good."

PC players often prefer a wider field of view, which offers more peripheral vision, but the advantage of a narrower field of view is that everything on the screen is closer together and easier to see because they take up more space. FOV sliders let players find our own sweet spot, but they're rarely an option in console games today, let alone back in 2006. "When it comes to consoles, the performance is a way more critical subject, and a larger FOV, even if it implies the same number of pixels to shade, leads to a direct increase in scene complexity," Laurent says. "The wider the FOV, the more objects can land in the view of the users and need to be rendered, the more shadows need to be calculated, the more complex the occlusion computations get, etc."

FIELD TESTING

For a cutting-edge open world game like *Oblivion*, a narrow FOV meant a mostly stable framerate. But why did that more enclosed view of the world leave some of us feeling hungover after a couple hours of bashing river crabs? Basically, your body thinks you ate some bad meat.

OK, that explanation requires some context, which Jordan DeLong, who has a PhD in psychology focused on perception and cognition, was happy to provide. One key detail: some of us are far more sensitive to a mismatched field of view than others.

"If it's a flight simulator where the vision doesn't match the [movement], it's actually fighter pilots that get motion sick first, because they have such a fine-grained expectation of how they should be moving," he says. "If you put them in a simulator and it's not the same, their

Types of FOV

In most games, FOV in the options menu refers to horizontal FOV (how far you can see to the left or right) often defaulting to around 80. But some games like *Battlefield* show you your vertical FOV instead, which will be a much lower number. Check out themetalmuncher.github.io/fov-calc to see how the two compare at different aspect ratios.

FAR LEFT: Games today know how to scale your first-person animations at high FOVs. *Oblivion*... not so much.

LEFT: Playing console *Oblivion* was a bit like staring through a telescope.

THE VIEW SPECTRUM *Four FOV values in* Hunt: Showdown, *from narrowest to widest*

85 FOV
At this zoom level, you could easily hit the broad side of that barn.

90 FOV
A small difference, but the middle distance is definitely more... distant.

100 FOV
This extra peripheral vision could help you spot someone on the roof.

110 FOV
Max FOV doesn't feel distorted, but it makes the centre of your vision smaller.

brain goes, 'Oh, something's off.' They have a finely honed expectation of what their physical reality should be like, given [what they're seeing]. It's a feedback loop, so that sets them off."

Even those of us who aren't fighter pilots have a lifetime's experience of moving through the world, which is why a first-person game with an FOV too divorced from our natural vision can be jarring. But why is motion sickness our body's response? Enter the bad meat, and bodily reflexes that date back to our caveman days.

"We're not good at detecting if we've been poisoned, whether some food was bad, or whether what you drank had something in it," says DeLong. "You can imagine in the past you're rolling around and eating different things, trial and error. Well, one of the best ways that you can detect whether you've been poisoned before any of the other symptoms is that there is a desynchrony between your perception and your motor system. Normally they're in sync with each other... when there's a disconnect between those two, it's usually, in a naturalistic sense, because you've been poisoned with something, or maybe you drank something on purpose or accidentally, that altered your perception. The nausea is your body trying to get you to throw up whatever you have eaten that has screwed up your proprioception, perception motor system. That's all it is."

SOME OF US ARE FAR MORE SENSITIVE TO A MISMATCHED FOV THAN OTHERS

VIEW ASKEW

In games this is most often blamed on a narrow field of view, but a too-wide FOV can cause the same bodily reaction – you're probably just more likely to notice a super-wide 'fish eye' field of view looks odd, and dial it back before feeling queasy.

"You would love for the FOV of the camera in the game to mimic the FOV of you actually moving through the actual world," he says. "And that's going to be different based on the actual size of the screen and how close it is to you. When I'm playing, I like to have the screen real close. And that kind of changes my opinion of what the FOV setting should be. Because if it's further away, well, then you'd actually expect it to be a narrower field than if you're up close, you expect it to be wider."

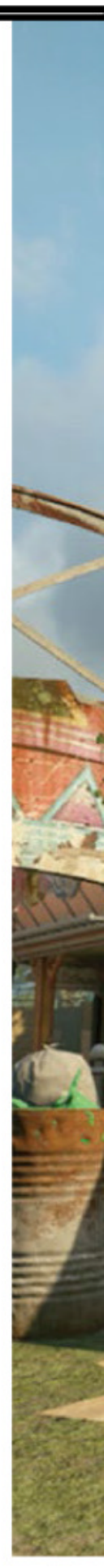
The closer your field of view setting comes to mirroring the portion of your vision the screen in front of you takes up, the more intuitive sense it will make to your brain. This is why there's no such thing as the 'best' field of view for any game: that number will vary dramatically based on how big your screen is and how close you are to it.

DeLong stresses that despite the motion sickness a less-than-ideal FOV can cause, we're exceptionally good at adapting. "There are a lot of keyboard warriors online that will say, 'The exact right field of view is this.' You know, you can get used to a lot of different stuff. That's something that your visual system is actually pretty good at doing, adapting and understanding. It takes a little while, but you can. I'm a little surprised that people think one is just better than the other. No. It's literally a personal, perceptual thing." ■

Wes Fenlon

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT



ART BEAT

Environment artist KEM YARALIOGLU explains the hidden depths of videogame art

A senior environment artist currently helping to develop Rare's upcoming title *Everwild*, Kem has also worked on other titles such as *Kena: Bridge of Spirits* and *Rainbow Six Siege*. The games are diverse, but the dedication and skill required always remain the same.

Kem credits the beginnings of his interest in art to his middle brother. For his part, Kem knew from the beginning that it was games he wanted to make art for and, with that in mind, studied 3D modelling at college before going on to study at Norwich University of the Arts.

He was fortunate enough to have a job lined up after graduation at Goodgame Studios in Germany, but just three to four weeks later, financial issues forced them to fire 500-600 people... including Kem. Ultimately, this proved beneficial for him. Pushed back into applying for jobs, he landed a role at Sperasoft, a developer that co-develops a lot of so-called 'AAA' games. Working on high profile titles helped him get noticed in the industry, setting him on the path that has led him to where he is today.

While different studios have different approaches, making art in games can often be a temporary position, but that's not to say that people are necessarily hired and fired at a moment's notice. "Through my own personal experience," says Kem, "I find if you stay somewhere long enough they will generally retain the talent, because they spent so long training you. There *are* a lot of contract positions out there, though They both have pros and cons."

Kem chose to give up a full-time job to work on *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*, where what was initially meant to be a three month gig ended up lasting about a year and a half.

"It was months of essentially just replacing a lot of things, building new assets that we needed. And coming up with solutions, like some gameplay solutions, what can we do to kind of make it look better from gameplay and also from an artistic perspective."

KICK ASSET

While developers are hired according to their specialisations – artist, designer, writer, etc – developers from different disciplines will often bounce off one another with ideas. This certainly happened with *Kena*. For example, a cavern was, initially, to begin flooding only after the player enters; but at Kem's suggestion, this changed to an already-flooded cavern that the player needs to drain.

It's tempting to think that an artist's job is largely the same in any medium, but game art involves what Kem refers to as "invisible issues". He gives the example of something simple, such as a wall, introducing the game-specific issue of collision detection, which somebody else then needs to take care of.

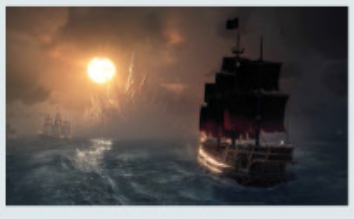
What about the fact that, as an interactive and (often) 3D medium, the artist doesn't have complete control over where and how the player will view their art? "I quite like it," Kem says, after a moment's thought. "People can view things and interpret it however they see fit if they have control. When you have games that have optional areas that an artist has spent time developing and building, there's a chance players won't ever see that."

One thing Kem is very keen to stress is the amount of time that goes into creating the simplest asset. A rock could take a week or two to create, due to multiple asset versions and texture creation. Similarly, colleagues from other departments pour hours into every project, and work from different areas intertwines in ways that are invisible to the player. While a minority of the audience can get vicious when issues aren't fixed, he's optimistic that most players understand enough to show a little patience. Games are, as he says with a grin, "Being held [together] with duct tape and superglue, essentially!" ■

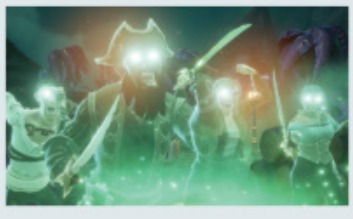
Luke Kemp

A BIT OF ARRRRIGHT

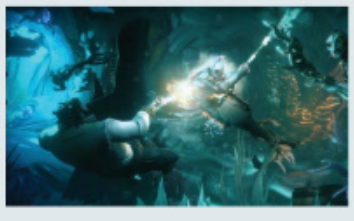
***Kem's work on* Sea of Thieves**



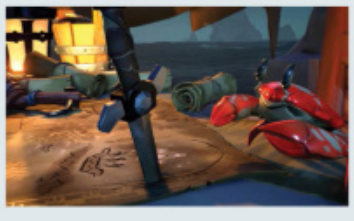
STAARRRRRF
Kem joined the team during development of the Disney crossover event.



COLLAARRBORATION
Kem says it is "paramount" that environment artists "work closely with other departments".



PAARRRTHFINDING
One technique used to nudge players in the right direction is lighting



THINKING AARRRRHEAD
"If it's an asset, we have to know what the intended use is before we start making it," says Kem.

A ROCK COULD TAKE A WEEK OR TWO TO CREATE, DUE TO MULTIPLE ASSET VERSIONS

ABOVE: Do you recognise *R6 Siege*'s theme park map? Kem helped make that!

FAR LEFT: Kem also helped make the *Rainbow Six Siege* Coastline map.

LEFT: An example of Kem's work on *Kena: Bridge of Spirits*.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

COMPANY OF HEROES 3

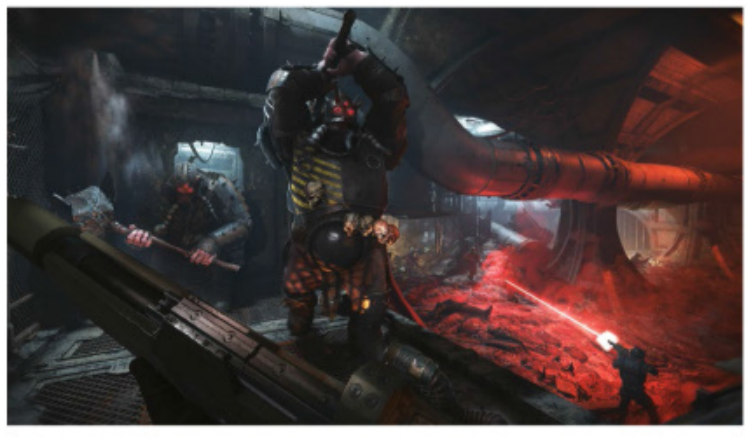
RELEASE November 17 | **DEVELOPER** Relic Entertainment

Explosive WWII action that seems poised to revive not only the series, but the whole RTS genre. Our hands-on previews have us convinced this is going to be a blinder.

EVIL WEST

RELEASE November 22 | **DEVELOPER** Flying Wild Hog

We should've banned developers from using the 'something West' name format years ago. This game is unrelated to *Hard West*, *Weird West*, *West of Loathing*, or *West of Dead*...



WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

RELEASE September 13 | **DEVELOPER** Fatshark

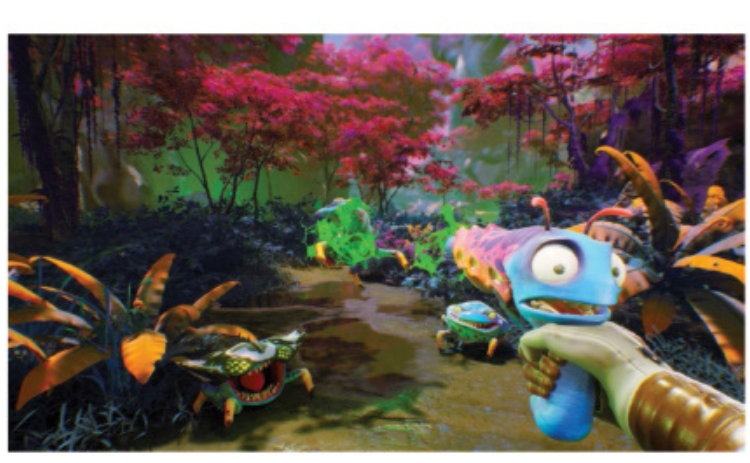
Battle through the grim darkness of the far future with three of your mates, and some very big guns, as the cult of a diseased god swarms to stop you.

3 months

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

RELEASE December 2, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Striking Distance Studios

A spiritual successor to *Dead Space* from some of that game's original creators. Escape a prison of mutants on Jupiter's moon.



HIGH ON LIFE

RELEASE December, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Squanch Games Inc

A colourful shooter from Justin Roiland, creator of Rick and Morty. Depending on your sensibilities you'll either find its rapid-fire dialogue very funny or intensely irritating.

FORSPOKEN

RELEASE January 24 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has save the world.

6 months

DELIVER US MARS

RELEASE February 2, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** KeokeN Interactive

An atmospheric and perilous adventure across the surface of the red planet, as you journey to discover what became of missing colony ships.

DEAD ISLAND 2

RELEASE February 3, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Dambuster Studios, Fishlabs

Yes, it's back, and it looks like it's actually coming out this time. It seems pretty decent too – we really enjoyed its brutal melee combat in our recent hands-on.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASE March 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

A ground-up remake of the classic original, much like *Resident Evil 2*, that promises more tension and bigger scares to go with its updated graphics, story, and controls.

12 months+

STARFIELD

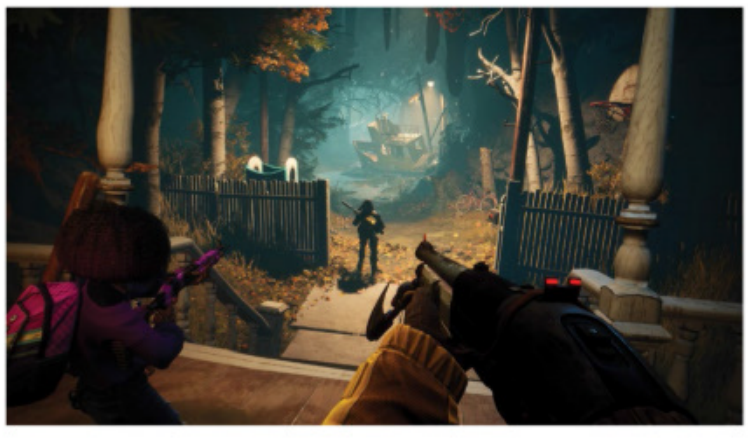
RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG – but if '*Skyrim* in space' can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

The long-awaited follow-up to the *Batman: Arkham* series, starring Harley Quinn and other super-villains forced to fight evil versions of Superman, The Flash, and more.



REDFALL

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Austin

The team behind *Prey* brings us a co-op, open world FPS about a team of vampire hunters, each with their own set of supernatural powers and hi-tech gadgets.

NEW DLC

PHANTOM MENACE

CD Projekt Red has announced new DLC coming for *Cyberpunk 2077*. *Phantom Liberty* will be out in 2023, and involves V being recruited for a mission by the US government.

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Drop Bear Bytes	Versus Evil	brokenroadsgame.com

BROKEN ROADS

The post-apocalypse is returning to Australia

B*roken Roads*' creative lead, Colin McComb, has a long history with CRPGs. He previously worked on *Fallout 2*, *Planescape: Torment,* and *Wasteland 2*. More recently he was creative lead on *Planescape*'s spiritual successor, *Torment: Tides of Numenera*. McComb is now taking a chance on Drop Bear Bytes, a new studio working on a debut project.

"Craig Ritchie called me up in 2020," says McComb. "He's the game director. He said, 'We'd like to get you on board with this game,' and I was like, 'Sell me on it.' He said, 'Post-apocalyptic.' I was like, 'Done three of them.' He said, 'Philosophical.' I was like, 'OK, sounds good.' He said, 'Set in Australia.' I'm like, 'Intriguing.' And then he said, 'It gets weird.'" Convinced, McComb joined the team.

I ask McComb what sets *Broken Roads* apart from the other RPGs he's worked on. "One of the big things is that the morality system in this game is not just good versus evil, not just law versus chaos, light versus dark, whatever. What we've got is what's called the Moral Compass." This system maps the actions you take along four philosophical quadrants: utilitarian, Machiavellian, nihilist and humanist. "The important thing is we aren't going to judge people based on what they choose."

CHOOSEY

So a player can go full nihilist, where nothing matters and their only drive is to have a good time. Or full Machiavellian, working for the sole benefit of the group that they're with. "That's fine. We'll give them complete reactivity. We're not going to punish them for it, except, you know, logically, people would react to you for being an asshole to them."

Your actions throughout the game will move your position on the compass, represented as a cone that can rest across multiple quadrants. Depending on your current position, certain conversation options will open up to you. And your approach in dialogue will have a major effect on your playthrough. "We want this to be a game about rationality in order to understand other people's points of view," says McComb, "and to understand you don't need to solve every problem with a bullet. I love *Wasteland*, I love *Fallout*, but the solution for almost all of them is violence. With this game, we want to make sure that you can have a pacifist playthrough that will feel rewarding, but that if you choose not to go with the pacifist route, it's going to be just as good."

YOUR APPROACH IN DIALOGUE WILL HAVE A MAJOR EFFECT ON YOUR PLAYTHROUGH

PLAYED IT

I did not go the pacifist route. I got to play a short hands-on demo as a hired gun – a mercenary who starts the game working with a team of scouts tasked with keeping the local area safe. Origin stories are picked during character creation – which also asks you a series of moral questions to help you find your starting position on the compass – and there will be four to choose from in the full game. "You can be a member of the barter crews," says Craig Ritchie, the aforementioned game director and studio founder, "the merchants and traders that do barter runs between locations. You can be a surveyor, which is like a cartographer or explorer that finds new settlements or sells information to the barter crews, 'Hey, I've found a town that you might sell water to.' Or you can be a Jackaroo, which is basically an Australian cowboy. So a farmhand, good with animals, knows how to handle a gun, can tinker and repair."

All of the origin stories will eventually converge – all players will face the same catastrophic inciting incident that kicks off the main adventure. But for now, I'm simply a mercenary arriving at Kokeby Waystation trading hub. There I meet Tina, the teenager who runs the trading post. She asks me to get rid of the

Broken Roads

previous mercenary she hired, who's become more of a hindrance than a help.

WALK AND TALK

I walk over, feeling confident in my diplomatic skills. But, sure enough, the merc is an arsehole. I could pay him off, but I'm just not inclined to make his life any easier. The conversation turns antagonistic and guns are drawn.

The fight is quick enough that I don't get to experience much of the turn-based combat system. I'm backed up by two scouts, so even though the merc gets some shots off, he's gunned down before any strategy comes into play. But I do experience some of the reactivity of the story, as later in a bar one of Tina's associates chews me out for my use of violence. There's no karma system judging my style of conflict resolution, but this one guy now thinks I'm incompetent.

Kokeby itself has a sprinkling of post-apocalyptic flavour – it's a little run-down, but otherwise nothing too extreme. "The game very intentionally takes you on a journey from the normal into the very, very weird," explains Ritchie. "So the beginning of the game very intentionally looks like it could just be a farming community in Western Australia." These are towns and trading posts where survivors were able to scavenge from stores of the pre-apocalypse world, and that defines their look and feel.

"If you look at just the early game," says Ritchie, "it's kind of normal – where's the post-apocalypse? But as you start to venture out, it gets more and more and more crazy and wacky. That was a big part of it, so you feel very familiar. And then, within the first hour of the game, you're thrown out into this scary, harsh world and you've got to find a new place to be. That's all reflected through the town design, the clothing design and character design."

DOWN UNDERWORLD

But as weird as it might get, the team also wants it to feel authentically Australian. Initially the studio wanted to set the game across the entirety of the country, but soon realised that, to pull it off, individual locations would be too shallow to really matter to the player. "We decided that instead we focus on Western Australia, and go deep," says McComb.

That means each town will not only have its own distinct look and sound, but also its own narrative vibe. "We represent different forms of government, which allows for different kinds of moral quandaries to be explored," says Ritchie, "as well as what's reflected in the clothing, reflected in the art, reflected in the feel of the town – everything's meant to have an essence that you can take away."

There's an edge to that authenticity, too. "From the very start of the project," says McComb, "before we even wrote a word, Craig made sure he had representatives of indigenous cultures speaking up and saying, 'Yeah, you can do that,' or, 'We'd appreciate it if you didn't.'"

The concept of post-apocalyptic Australia feels very different now – in the midst of the climate crisis – than it did back in the days of Mad Max. "We feel it a lot," says Sunderland. "Almost on a monthly basis, something is going on where – it's right in front of us, you know? Here's the proof."

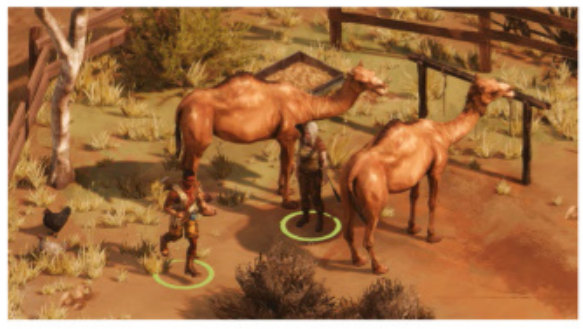
"You just had floods..." says McComb. "Exactly," continues Sunderland, "we go from one extreme to the other. We have bushfires that ravage an eighth of the country, and then we have floods that ravage a quarter of the country."

But while environmental disaster is a theme in the game, for Ritchie it's just one part of a broader message. "The design was, let's imagine you've got a decision tree for the next ten to twenty years, and at every single point humans made the worst possible decision, whether it's climate change, political division and extremism, environmental collapse and another financial crisis – just really being as shitty as you can ... we're not we're not trying to make some massive big statement, but looking at all the mistakes that people seem to be making these days."

Inevitably, as a more philosophical CRPG, *Broken Roads* invites comparison to *Disco Elysium*, one of the best games of the decade so far. I only got to play a tiny portion of the game – nowhere near enough to tell if it can match such a high bar, or even come close. What I can tell you is that, of everything I saw at Gamescom this year, *Broken Roads* feels like it has the most potential. If the team can fully realise their absurdly ambitious plans, they've got the chance to make something really special. I really hope that they can pull it off.

Phil Savage

INITIALLY THE STUDIO WANTED TO SET THE GAME ACROSS THE ENTIRETY OF THE COUNTRY



ABOVE: Your position on the moral compass defines what you can say to others.

LEFT: Your morality will continue to update as you play.

Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn

ABOVE: The world-building is immediately intriguing.

RIGHT: This is a great example of a bug that is simply too large.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Early 2023	A44 Games	Kepler Interactive	playflintlock.com

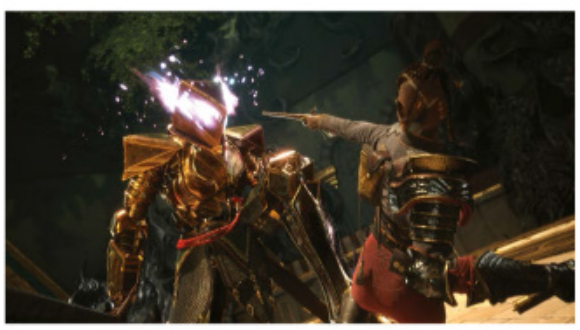
FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN

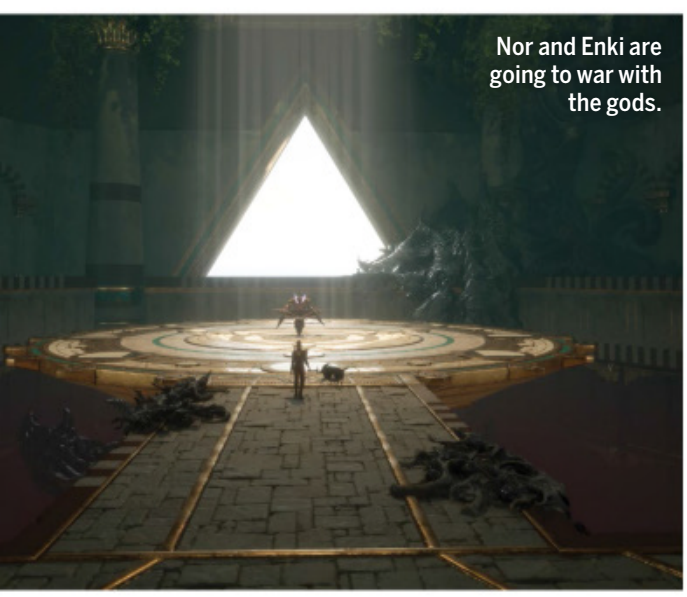
A *Souls*-like that isn't afraid of difficulty options

Despite being enamoured by what *Souls* games offer, I've never been one to dedicate the time and effort required to learn their intricacies. For *Flintlock: The Siege of Dawn*'s development team over at A44, they want to capture the fun and grit of a *Souls*-like while also trying to make it much more approachable for people like me.

During my brief look at the game, I'm told that it lies somewhere between the *Souls* series and modern-day *God of War*, and while that wasn't immediately obvious to me, I start to see it. *Flintlock* blends theatrical, twirling attacks and grand cinematics with strategic fights that require spacial awareness and trial-and-error to nail. The team has come a long way since its predecessor *Ashen* – I watch as protagonist Nor and her furry companion Enki scramble across platforms scattered across gorgeous environments, a blend of the medieval and magical. Nor brandishes her axe, swinging with weighty force, weaving in her gun attack as she whips it off her back to shoot the stumbling enemy. It looks like it flows well, and A44 says that the way you go about tackling each enemy matters. Getting an axe kill will net you bullets for your gun, which you can then use to kill baddies for extra armour.

It's not just Nor who can attack, either. While she partakes in more traditional methods of combat, Enki provides the dash of fun fantasy magic. They can attack and charge up abilities to support Nor, tripping enemies and causing mischief. It's a nice juxtaposition between the two, though at the point in the story I'm seeing the two are still relatively unfamiliar with each other. Nor does have minimal access to magic for traversal, but the two largely serve different purposes.





Nor and Enki are going to war with the gods.

WITH EACH GOD DEFEATED ENKI CAN NICK THEIR POWERS FOR THEIR OWN USE

POWER TRIP

There's another thing Enki can do: steal the power of the gods. With the door to the afterlife being opened, there are all sorts of old gods knocking around *Flintlock*'s world. Putting them back in their place is the duo's goal, and with each god defeated Enki can nick their powers for their own use. One such god is the god of knowledge, holed up in a library. Nor once again spends time leaping along various platforms, dodging attacks as she goes. She goes straight for the god's knees, an obvious weak spot. It's certainly got tells of *Souls* games running through the combat – carefully reading the bosses moves, dodging appropriately – but also feels more action oriented.

NEW INFO

TAKE A BREAK

Outside of the combat, Nor can help to rebuild towns out in the world. Camps contain NPCs that have certain quests to complete, all contributing towards redevelopment. These camps are a sort of hybrid between *Ashen's* town and bonfires of the *Souls* series. They're where Nor can recuperate, spend influence she's earned (souls, basically), and eventually build up a tidy following. Whenever she finds a new camp out in the world, that following will go with her, moving around as she travels from place to place.

I really like the look of *Flintlock*, despite it being pretty far from my usual game of choice. A44 has done a lovely job of making the game look rhythmic and flowing, and the concept of taking a Souls-like and making it accessible across difficulty options is massively appealing to me. While I'm unsure if the narrative will hook me in, the combat alone looks satisfying enough to lure me into this strange fantasy world.

Mollie Taylor

ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE

Ubisoft takes the series back to basics... sort of

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2023	**DEVELOPER** Ubisoft
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** ubisoft.com

Despite starring Basim, one of the major characters of *Valhalla*, the *Assassin's Creed* game *Mirage* is most likely to remind you of is the very first one. That's very much intentional – this scaled down entry is here to take the series back to its roots.

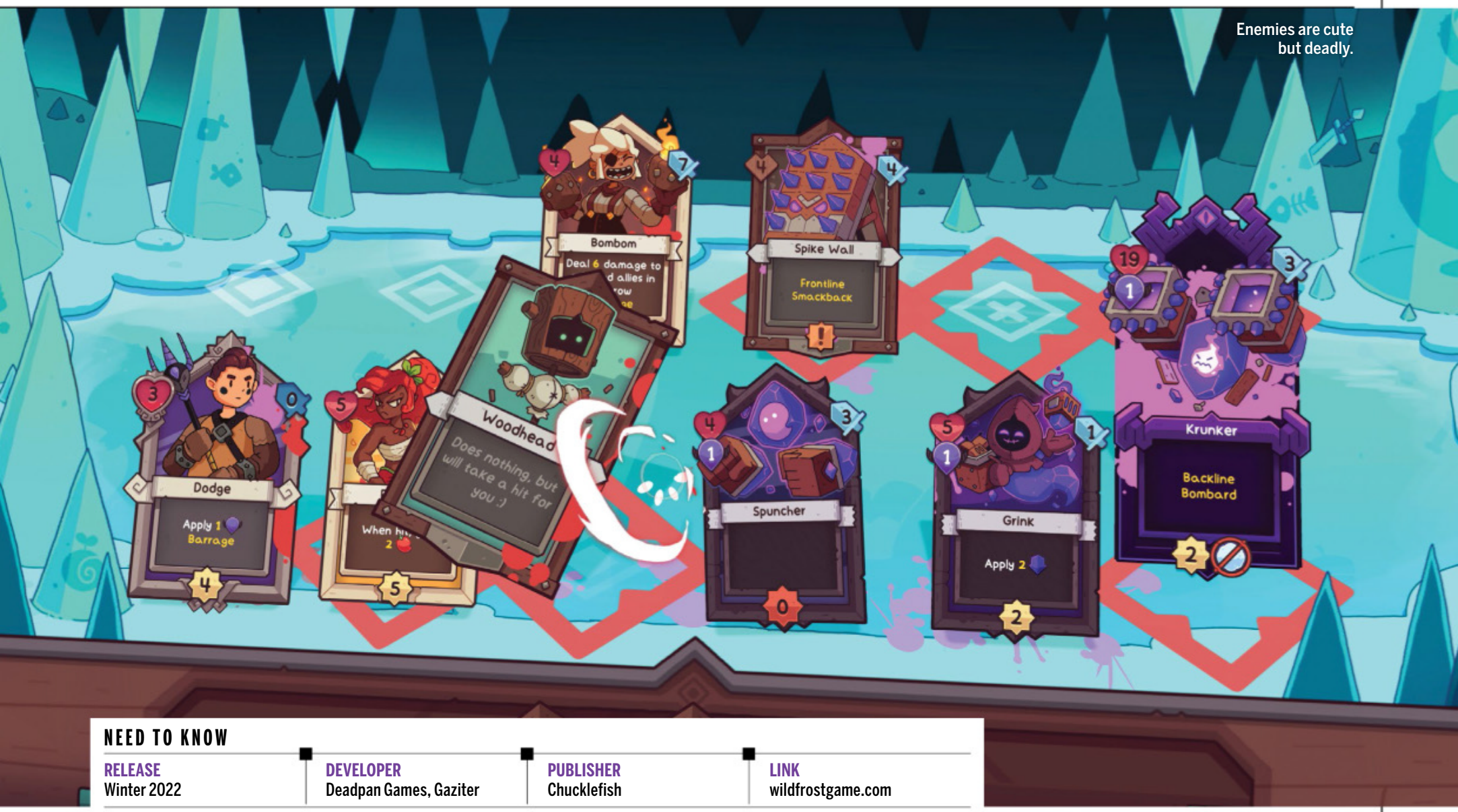
That means a Middle Eastern city location, sure, but also a renewed focus on stealth, and a more restrained scope compared to its recent open world siblings. The story will chart Basim's rise from a humble thief to a respected member of the 'Hidden Ones'.

Of course, Ubisoft can never truly keep things simple, which is why it's also announced three more *Assassin's Creed* games. '*Codename Red*' looks to be set in feudal Japan and be more in line with the sprawling open world RPGs the series has focused on in recent years. '*Codename Hexe*' is more mysterious – a teaser hints at a story based around witchcraft, and we're told it's going to be something brand-new for *Assassin's Creed*.

NEW INFO

If that's feeling like *AC* overload, you at least probably don't need to worry about the last one – '*Codename Jade*' is another open world RPG set in ancient China, with a customisable main character, but it's only announced for mobile. On the other hand, if you're already impatient for more, there's a final, free DLC for *Valhalla* that ties up the remaining loose ends.

Robin Valentine



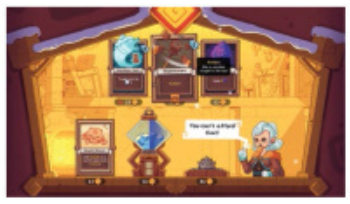
Enemies are cute but deadly.

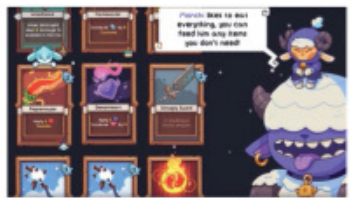
NEED TO KNOW

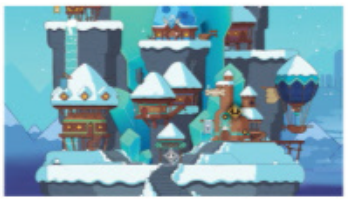
RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Winter 2022	Deadpan Games, Gaziter	Chucklefish	wildfrostgame.com

WILDFROST

Stay frosty to survive in this snowbound roguelike







The funny thing about *Wildfrost* is that, despite the unnatural ice and snow covering every inch of its fantasy world, it instantly feels warm and cosy. Adorable, bouncy characters wrapped up in their fuzzy winter gear instantly make you feel at home – perfectly off-setting both the apocalyptic premise and the deadly roguelike battles.

PLAYED IT

So, yes, this is another roguelike deckbuilder, in the same vein as *Slay the Spire* and *Monster Train*. You travel across the map, picking which nodes to visit in order to gain extra cards and resources, you fight in turn-based battles, and die a lot while slowly gaining permanent upgrades that make future runs more manageable. It's an overstuffed genre these days, there's no doubt about that – but even in this early build I think *Wildfrost* does enough to stand out.

Battles play out over two lanes with three spots on each for your heroes, and ditto for your enemies. Your deck consists of a handful of characters to drop onto them, and then a collection of support cards to bolster them and keep them alive. That last point's important – not only can heroes be permanently killed if not kept safe, but if your leader falls, your run is over.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Once placed on the map, neither allies nor enemies immediately attack. Each has a countdown, ticking down turn by turn until they strike. It's this system that really starts to give the combat layers.

Success means rearranging your heroes' fighting order each turn, putting those ready to attack in the best position to maximise their effect, and protecting your more vulnerable fighters from imminent enemy reprisal. On a turn when all your foes are idle, you're safe to throw your assassin to the front to deal a burst of damage to the boss, before swapping your tank to the lead when a slow but powerful attack threatens to be thrown back your way.

BATTLES PLAY OUT OVER TWO LANES WITH THREE SPOTS ON EACH FOR YOUR HEROES

GO WITH THE FLOW

Cards let you mess with the flow – freezing an enemy to add another turn to their clock, or dropping a damage barrier just before they strike, or instantly ticking an ally's counter down (even allowing them to strike out of turn order entirely if timed right). It's that special kind of strategy based on having all the information in front of you – knowledge of not just what will happen next turn, but even several turns into the future – and having to deploy your tools in the best possible way you can. The answer's always right in front of you. When you get it, you're a genius; when you flub it, you're a fool. A fool who's already clicking the 'new run' button.

Robin Valentine

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Petroglyph Games	Frontier Foundry	playthegreatwar.com

THE GREAT WAR: WESTERN FRONT

Petroglyph's WWI RTS will be won by inches, not miles

You know the bit before a big battle in *Total War*? Where you prep for the fight by repositioning your units, choosing your formations, and making everything nice and organised. *The Great War: Western Front* has this too. Only, the pre-battle phase represents a month leading up to the battle. And it's not neat, but rather the brutal reflection of ongoing conflict.

You're not just shifting units around. You're preparing the battlefield for the conflict ahead. You'll dig out trenches and protect them with barbed wire. You'll fill those trenches with infantry, and further protect your territory with machine gun nests. You're changing the landscape for years to come, in pursuit of a marginal victory that could slowly push the war in your favour.

This is a World War I RTS, which means victory won't be quick and easy. The mantra for *The Great War: Western Front* is that this will be a 'battle of inches' – marginal gains that slowly tip the war in your favour. Whether you choose to play as the Allies or the Central Powers, you'll win by grinding down your opponent – taking actions that will deplete their 'National Will'. This is the main resource of the campaign, and if either side lets it drop to zero, they lose the war.

In a hands-off demo, Petroglyph gives me an overview of Theatre Command mode. Here, each turn represents a month of the war, and players are presented with events to respond to and missions to undertake. The events are a classic grand strategy affair. In the demo, we see one about troops suffering from shellshock, and have the option to ignore it – losing National Will – or to address the issue by spending cash.

A mission from command requests an assault on Drocourt. If it's completed within three turns, it will mean a big boost to the Allies' National Will. But 'assault' does not mean 'capture'. Rather, the objective is to take hold of a specific control point on the battlefield. If successful, it will reduce the Central Powers' grip on the region – represented by stars on the tile.

THIS IS A WORLD WAR I RTS, WHICH MEANS VICTORY WON'T BE QUICK AND EASY

FIRST LOOK

TURNING POINT

"We don't want to overwhelm the player with 30 battles per turn," says lead designer Chris Becker. "We figure the player will have four or five battles every three or four turns, but they're all going to come at once." The idea here is that, if multiple battles happen on the same territory in the same turn, its defenders will suffer a morale penalty. By attacking from multiple fronts within the same turn, you can reduce its hold and take the area.

"Every turn you don't attack a territory, they'll regain one of their stars back," says Becker. "So if you're going to go for that line, you have to make sure you have a very co-ordinated assault." This is made easier by the fact that your units aren't limited by movement, and can be placed anywhere on the map once per turn. And while this might sound strange to grand strategy fans used to worrying about supply lines and logistics, it allows the game to focus on being first and foremost an RTS.

Loading into the Drocourt assault, we enter Field Commander mode – where the RTS battles take place. Drocurt's battlefield is already scarred. Old trenches remain, and are a potential point of vulnerability, meaning the pre-planning phase also needs to take into account what already exists. A sprawling network of trenches only works if you have the manpower to defend it.

"Each battlefield is represented from one territory to the next," says Becker. "So the territory itself doesn't have a battlefield, but rather has a battlefield it shares with a neighbour. The more you fight on those lines, the more scarring

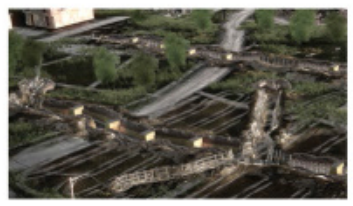
The Great War: Western Front

The Great War: Western Front

RIGHT: Tanks can help draw fire away from your troops.

BELOW: This was just a nice field once.

This is not, it has to be said, a nice day out.



you're going to see. The other one that happens a lot is the trench layouts get more complicated through each battle. But you do have to be careful. If you have too many trenches and you can't fill them all, then your enemy is going to jump in and take advantage of that."

EYE IN THE SKY

In addition to building new trenches and shoring up defences, you can use the planning phase to attack the enemy too – setting up days of advanced artillery shelling in an attempt to create a path for your eventual assault. When the battle begins, an observation balloon reveals what's become of the battlefield. An enemy trench is destroyed, and they're reinforcing their troops – clear sign that the bombardment has had an effect. We also see that the enemy has an observation balloon of their own, and so launch an aerial balloon busting mission to disrupt their intel gathering.

Aircraft are autonomous in *The Great War*, but will follow the orders that you assign. Here they set about destroying balloons, but there are other missions too. In fact, in response to the balloon busters, the Central Powers launch an air superiority mission to bring them down. The Allies respond in kind, triggering a dogfight for control of the skies.

With the air war at a stalemate, the Central Powers launch an assault on our trenches, sending their troops through forests to mask their approach. We launch an artillery strike on the area, but without an exact position to target, some of their men get through. The Central Powers are also shelling our location in an attempt to suppress our forces and neuter our defence. But ultimately the barbed wire and machine guns do their job. The few troops that do survive the rush over No Man's Land are defeated in melee combat in the trenches.

Time for a counter-attack. By using control groups, you can set up waves of attacks that will help your push into No Man's Land. The Allies first send through some tanks to draw fire, before following with the main infantry push. But even if we do make it to the trenches, the enemy will reinforce. This is where the mines come in.

WITH THE AIR WAR AT A STALEMATE, THE CENTRAL POWERS LAUNCH AN ASSAULT

TUNNEL VISION

The Great War's tech tree exists on the command level, meaning your options will expand slowly as the years roll on. It's an extensive list that covers everything from infantry and artillery to tanks, and aircraft, but also espionage, economic upgrades, and defensive options. Earlier in the demo, Becker selected the Death From Below option, which unlocks 'undermining' – a rather literal interpretation of the concept.

Placed during the pre-battle phase, these mines will now make their presence felt. The explosion cuts off the enemy's attempt to reinforce, and also takes out some artillery, reducing the pressure on our push into No Man's Land. This is further helped by our own artillery, which is now firing a rolling barrage that kicks up a smoke screen to obscure our troops.

As our troops filter into their trench line, the battle shifts. With reinforcements cut off, we're able to start clearing out trenches segment by segment. The skirmish is all but over, and we capture the control point with little resistance.

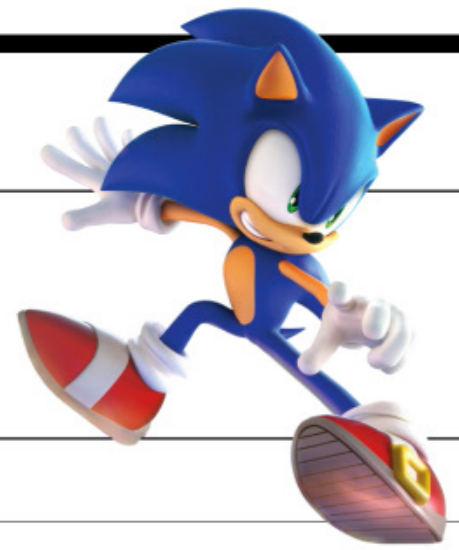
At this point the fight could continue, but with the objective complete the Allies call for a ceasefire – ending the battle and, thus, the mission. The result is a great victory – a control point was captured and the Central Powers suffered heavy losses. But even a marginal victory will have an effect on the National Will. At this point in the game, it's 1916. As the years roll on, though, that effect on National Will will become more and more pronounced until eventually you're suffering huge penalties. "Because the game is based on National Will, there's a fixed end," says Becker.

With careful, tactical play, you can extend the war, but only up to 1919. "Events towards the end will start being more and more punitive on the National Will – eventually you're just going to run out. Whereas the actual war ended earlier, if a player is playing in a certain way he could theoretically extend it."

There's an inherent danger in basing your game on World War I. Even here, it's depicted as a war of marginal gains and losses that add up over the years until one side's literal will to fight drains away. But Petroglyph is focusing on the right things – leaning into the brutal battle of attrition, the technological arms race, the years of destruction being written into the battlefields themselves. It's harrowing, but tactically fascinating: an RTS where there's no real winner, just a side that loses the most.

Phil Savage

Sonic Frontiers



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
November 8, 2022	Sonic Team	Sega	bit.ly/3qX6cvw

SONIC FRONTIERS

An incoherent mess that's failing to find a future for the series

I'm bouncing through a cyber space portal, one of *Sonic Frontiers*' mini stages. Sonic's erratic movement has caused me to slip off a rotating platform one time too many and I'm growing tired. Finally, the end. The only thing between me and the goal is a simple jump panel. I go at it, full speed... and it overshoots me. The goal whizzes past me as I fall into the abyss and return to the beginning of the stage.

Perhaps it had something to do with this being the final appointment of a tiresome three day press trip, but I couldn't help but feel deeply frustrated. A deep sigh unwillingly passes my lips. It's at this moment I wasn't having any fun, and *Sonic Frontiers* had officially broken me.

I really wanted to like *Sonic Frontiers*. The blue blur has the world as his own personal playground, railings to grind on and jump pads to launch from sprinkled across grand plains and sandy trenches. It really sounds great in concept, but after playing 30 minutes of the game's second island, I'm not too sure if Sonic should be given the whole world to blitz through.

FEELING BLUE

Don't get me wrong, burning rubber across desert island Ares is as fun as it is in any other Sonic game. But there's an awful lot of empty space – space which suffers from pop-ins of rails and other classic *Sonic* traversal doodads. They appear awfully suddenly and have the thoughtful placement of a drunk man playing Jenga. There's a real lack of flow to them, and in a game that already looks a bit rough it further hampers the overall level design. When I think of the bombastic levels of *Sonic* past, *Frontiers* is terribly soulless in comparison.

I scurry around and quickly come across a Guardian, large boss encounters that incorporate some light action with puzzling. I ascend into the air by grinding along a series of rings before reaching three large rings circling the boss itself. It's relatively simple work at first, having to fully highlight all three rings before I'm allowed to whack at the boss. I'm flung back to the ground, forced to climb once again. It's a little slow and frustrating, and then extra projectiles flung at me during round two see me lose all my rings and eat dirt. I don't have the heart to attempt the slow ascension once again.

HOG WILD

Most of my time was spent sort of scurrying around, figuring out just what to do next. It was hard to get a grasp for *Sonic Frontiers*' many systems in the short time frame. It feels like there are a number of different mechanics, modes, and minigames to sink my teeth into.

PLAYED IT

Every other loading screen I'm thrown into a tutorial or drill to learn the game's various mechanics, another thing that feels like it interrupts Sonic's flow. I can't help but feel like *Sonic Frontiers* is just an incoherent mess and, for me personally, a mess I wasn't having much fun with.

Sonic Frontiers is the perfect example of how not every game needs to try and make grand, open world formats work. Linear is cool, baby, and I feel as though Sonic has a much better time when he's given a little less space and better constructed levels to play around with. Being the fastest lad in the world is cool, but it doesn't have the same impact when half of that world is an empty desert. I hope if I have a little more time to learn its intricacies, I can find a fun experience, but it feels like it'll still be held back by lifeless level design.

Mollie Taylor

MOST OF MY TIME WAS SPENT SORT OF SCURRYING AROUND, FIGURING OUT WHAT TO DO

Going fast isn't fun if you don't know where you're going.

ABOVE: The world is oddly barren.

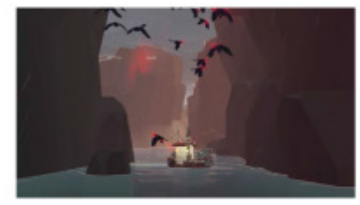
LEFT: Early footage had fans worried – and this hands-on hasn't reassured me.

Dredge

ABOVE: Don't think too much about what's lurking underneath.

RIGHT: I'm sure he's just coming to say hello, right? Right?

FAR RIGHT: Mysterious characters lurk in every corner of *Dredge*.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Black Salt Games	Team 17	blacksaltgames.com

DREDGE

This fintastic horror fishing game has reeled me in

It's almost a little too easy to become comfortable with *Dredge*. I've been sailing all night in my little fishing boat, *Tetris*-ing fish inside my inventory *Resident Evil*-style. I'm so engrossed I've failed to notice rocks snapping into existence and the mysterious critters that are slithering their way into my meticulously organised vessel.

Dredge is more than your usual fish-and-chill. It's a mysterious, sinister survival game dressed up in wellies. The premise is simple: after totalling your old boat near the island of Greater Marrow, the shady mayor gifts you a rickety craft and a debt, repaid in sea creatures. There's not much I'm able to grab at first – a flounder, mostly carp, easy enough to slot into my inventory. Paying off my debt and installing some upgrades opens up bigger catches.

Larger fish with more complex shapes appear. Eels are simple three-tile straight lines, while bronze whalers are annoying bastards with one-tile prongs sticking out either end. With rods, engines, reels, and other trawling tools also taking up space, it becomes a game of strategy. Instead of diving in head-first, I take the time to think about which tools are right for the job. I'm not great at planning ahead, but quests handed out by NPCs help steer me in the right direction of what to pack.

As I head out, the mayor warns me to come back before nightfall. Pfft! I have a lantern, a rod, and my wits about me. A bit of darkness isn't going to scare me.

I'M FACED WITH A SICKLY SEA CRITTER ABOUT TO INFECT MY OTHER GOODS

Except it absolutely is. The Black Salt Games team lets me know that while I've been fishing away carefree, my poor fisherman has been panicking for a hot minute. Those rocks I've been dodging, seemingly appearing out of nowhere? I've been hallucinating them, my anxiety willing them into existence.

DON'T PANIC

An eye indicator at the top of the screen dictates the panic meter – now staring at me, fiery red with an erratic pupil. Not sleeping or fishing too long in the thick night fog will propel the panic meter up. Keeping your boat lantern on or getting some shuteye can offer respite, with more options to save your sanity unlocking later.

I hurry back to Greater Marrow, helpfully directed by an ever-present lighthouse. My fisherman friend awakes, the panic meter's eye finally soothed. The problems aren't over, though. I open my cargo to find a catch covered in purple blotches, infected by last night's slimy evildoer. I thought it was just my imagination, yet I'm faced with a sickly sea critter about to infect my other goods.

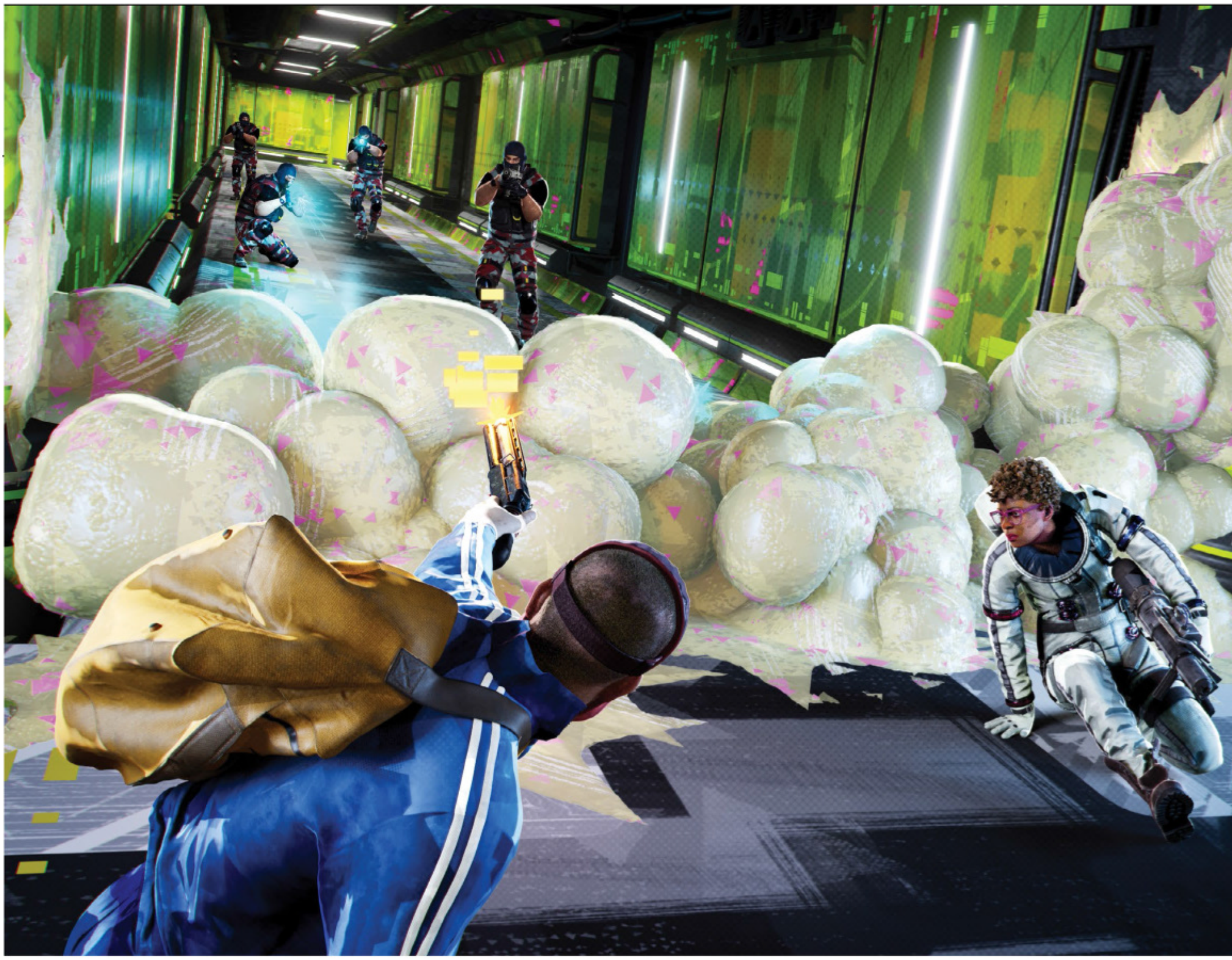
PLAYED IT

I should discard it, but curiosity gets the better of me. I leave it with one other fish and prepare to set sail. This is when I discover another one of *Dredge*'s quirks. Most of the sea creatures are real, with an encyclopaedia recording each catch. But underneath each log lies a few variants. While their shapes are currently cloaked behind shadow it's clear they're out of the ordinary. One such is a carp, bright yellow with three bulging eyes. I reel one in from my fishing spot, and moments later my infected fish latches onto the regular catch next to it. That too becomes a three-eyed monstrosity. The team tells me it's actually quite rare to have a newly-infected fish mutate, and yet here we are.

I'm already gearing up to discover more weird and wonderful variations, but my time with *Dredge* is up. I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked in – "fishing horror" seems to be emerging as a genre, which is wild, but *Dredge* proves how damn well it works. An hour in and I feel like I've only entered the shallow end of what the game has to offer. I can't wait to discover what lies in its depths.

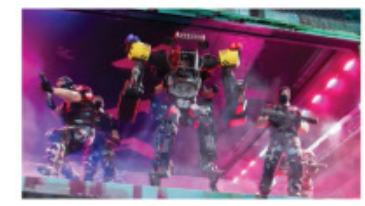
Mollie Taylor

Hyenas



ABOVE: A cleverly deployed foam barrier can give you a tactical edge in combat.

RIGHT: Fighting in zero-G is an interesting twist.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Creative Assembly	Sega	playhyenas.com

HYENAS

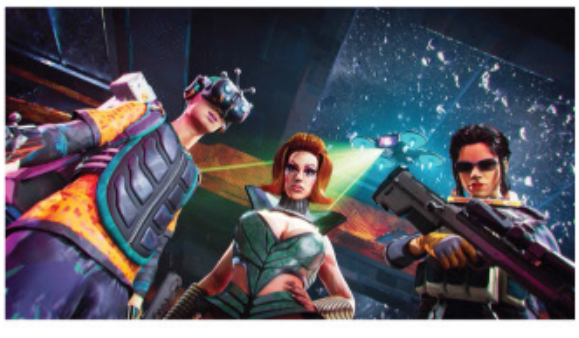
Will this ambitious zero-G shooter be a hye-nah?

Even after seeing a 20-minute preview, I'm a little confused about what *Hyenas* is trying to be. It feels so far removed from Creative Assembly's prior catalogue, but here's what I do know: it's a PvPvE looter shooter that's a little too desperate for you to know how quirky and self-aware it is. It's colourful and bombastic but also so deeply and incredibly cringe worthy.

Earth has gone to shit, the billionaires have pissed off to Mars and left the little people to fend for themselves on 'the Taint'. Status doesn't appear to come from wealth in *Hyenas*, but rather from owning piles of pop culture tat. Inevitably the preview I'm shown is packed with some not-so-subtle winks and nudges for Sega's library and even some non-blue blur outings like *Fall Guys*.

These bits of tat are mostly knocking about on giant spacecrafts called plundership, which you (as a Hyena) and your two teammates will be infiltrating in order to secure these sought-after items. Nabbing loot and gaining enough 'clout points' (yes, really) lets you escape the ship with all your self-referential goodies. There are five teams per match fighting it out, along with security bots and other defensive mechanisms to fight through in order to reach each stash that is dotted around the map.

The mentions of clout, swag and other terms that should've been left dead in the 2010s are already making me grimace, and then out comes the explosive Mega Drives – or Sega Genesis for the US folk, as the narrator flippantly jokes – that are used to breach the loot rooms. *Hyenas* is clearly supposed to be very tongue-in-cheek, anti-capitalist, but also in a weird, meta, self-loving way that gives me a strange case of tonal whiplash.



Basically, all these characters have Funko Pop collections.

HYENAS IS CLEARLY SUPPOSED TO BE VERY TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

FOAM PARTY

I get a glimpse of three characters in *Hyenas*' roster. There's sniper El Silbón, who employs foam grenades to create barriers and entrap enemies, which looks incredibly fun. Drag queen Galaxia sports reflective barriers, and ballerina Prima can float around any part of the map with her zero-gravity jetpack. They all seem nice enough. The preview doesn't do a good job of making me feel attached to any particular one, something that's important to me when a game is pushing a fixed character roster on to you.

Despite not feeling strong about a lot of *Hyenas*, the map and combat manages to grab my attention. Certain areas around the map allow you to make use of zero gravity, floating to either escape your enemies or provide a good vantage point for gunning them down. It can be used to quickly traverse from point to point too and feels like a good way to get some quick coverage across large spaces. The maps are also fitted with vents that can be used to sneak your way around the ship, which Creative Assembly says should open up opportunities for how each match is tackled by teams. I like the idea of trying to quietly tackle each vault, letting other teams fight each other and the environmental hazards and slipping away before anyone can notice.

NEW INFO

Hyenas looks to be playing with some interesting concepts, but they're steeped in a weird meta-cringe I can't quite overlook. I can't tell if this is a game that's trying too hard or not trying hard enough, and I'm unsure how good a chance it has of squeezing itself into an already oversaturated genre. It feels a little rough right now, understandable considering the alpha footage, but I can't help but worry that *Hyenas* will be gone as quick as it arrives.

Mollie Taylor

Dordogne

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Spring 2023	Umanimation	Focus Interactive	focus-entmt.com

DORDOGNE

A watercolour memory of peaceful summer holidays

When I first meet Mimi, she's in her room at her grandmother's house, inspecting her latest find – a cassette player fashioned into a tape recorder with the help of a microphone. With the press of a button, the point of view slips into first-person perspective. Raising the recorder, I move Mimi around, until... there! Birdsong fills my headphones from the opened window.

As you can tell from the idyllic, sunny setting, this is Mimi's summer holiday. Mimi is no longer a child, but she remembers her outings to the French Dordogne region like they happened yesterday. As player, I'm not only joining her on her trip to memory lane, I also get to see what has had the most impact on her.

Inspecting the house, I find words floating in the air; all of them describe feelings Mimi associates with seemingly mundane items or situations, such as putting honey on toast. *Dordogne* is full of little tactile moments, too – pouring milk over cereal, taking pictures with the delightfully named Funaroid camera. While these gameplay elements are simple in their execution, and seem to be of no particular significance, they are vital to the story *Dordogne* wants to tell.

"Interactive storytelling is the method of the future," Umanimation founder Aymeric Castaing says. "There is no medium that combines as many art forms as the video game, and we use our expertise in art and animation to make something that not only looks good but that is interactive in all the ways that fit our theme." Castaing explains that it's those little moments of sensory pleasure, such as hearing birdsong, that really make situations memorable. *Dordogne* lets me collect these impressions, before I turn them into little in-game multimedia scrapbook entries, complete with a haiku the game helps me write from all the words I've found.

EVERY ELEMENT OF DORDOGNE EXISTS IN SERVICE OF ITS NARRATIVE

CHILD'S PLAY

Dordogne is loosely based around Un Je Ne Sais Quoi founder and creative director Cédric Babouche's own memories of his childhood in the region. The landscapes players get to explore are often in situ paintings Babouche created on location.

"The game's objective is not to centre on the Dordogne region itself, but to bring up positive feelings and memories for the player no matter where they're from", he says. "Swimming, skipping stones, collecting things we find, enjoying lights and sounds... these conjure up a sense of childhood wonder, and hopefully we can convey that feeling whether it's something you've experienced before or not."

PLAYED IT

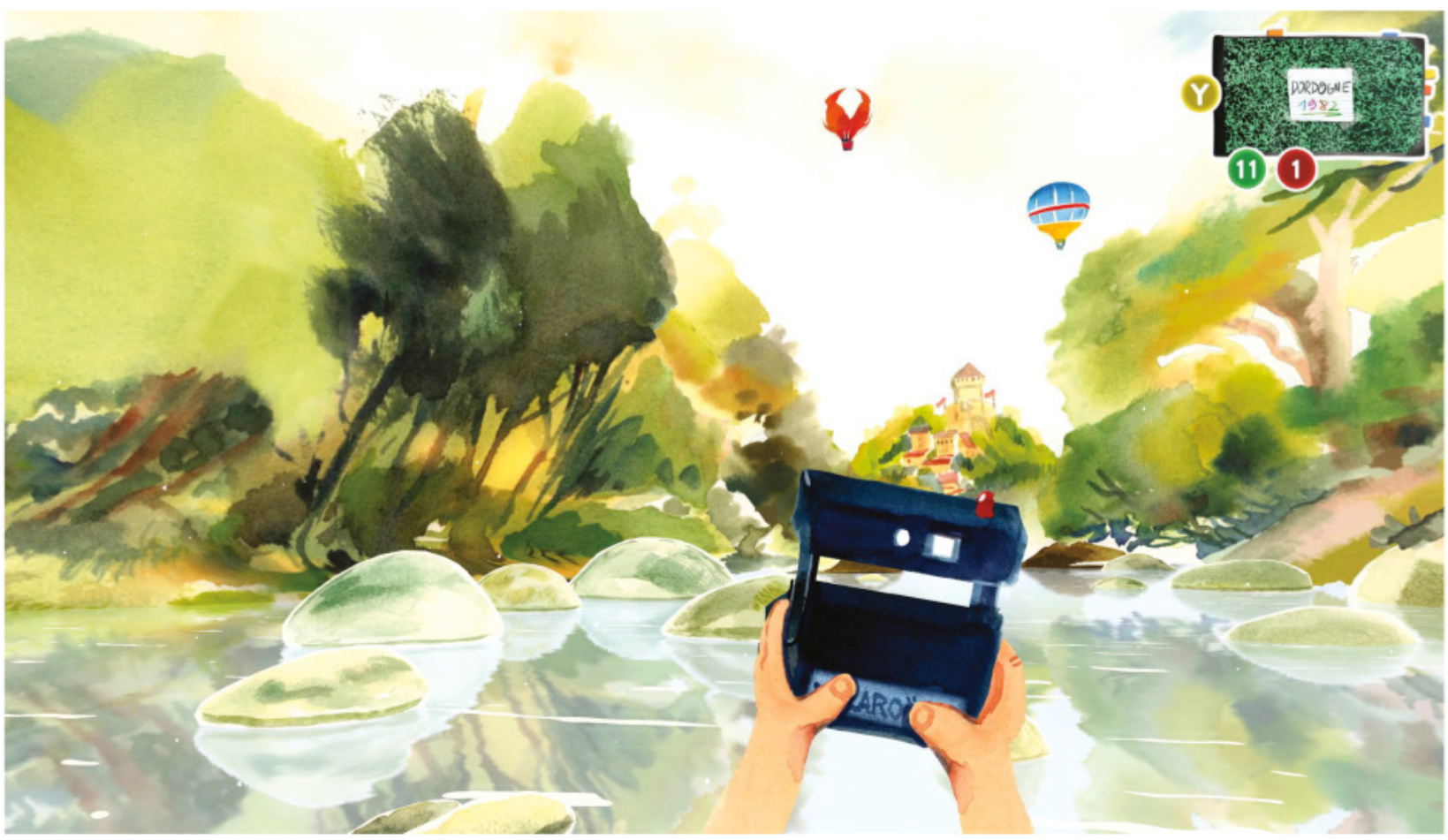
Castaing nods enthusiastically when I describe feeling an odd sense of nostalgia for a place I've never been to. "We're very interested in the potential of interactive media and its potential to evoke emotions like satisfaction and relaxation," he says, and professes a strong interest in immersive technologies such as VR and XR ('extended reality').

Babouche points out that in the end, every element of *Dordogne* exists in service of its narrative and general sense of exploration within the game's linear structure. "*Dordogne* is a vehicle transporting the characters, but it's up to the player to decide where to go," he says.

At the end of the demo, I watch Mimi come back to the present. She's now a woman in her thirties, ready to pack up her recently deceased grandmother's belongings. While this should be a sad occasion, it's clear that Mimi is celebrating her grandmother through her childhood memories. *Dordogne*, it seems, is not just a game about enjoying the good times, but also who we spend them with.

Malindy Hetfeld

Dordogne



ABOVE: The watercolour backgrounds make it slightly difficult to spot usable items.

LEFT: You can take pictures of anything that speaks to you.

Sins of a Solar Empire II

STARS

TRUCK

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE II is reaching for the sky... and beyond

By Fraser Brown

Sins of a Solar Empire II

For a lover of 4Xs who never quite got over the decline of real-time strategy, *Sins of a Solar Empire* was a panacea. It took most of what I adored about both strategy models and smooshed them together in an epic clash in space. It was a revelation that I expected to inspire imitators, but nearly 15 years on nobody else has attempted to replicate this extremely successful experiment. Thankfully, that's about to change. *Sins of a Solar Empire II* is coming.

Developer Ironclad Games has been thinking about this sequel for a long time. The last piece of *Sins* DLC came out in 2018, a decade after the base game launched, and while Ironclad didn't immediately start work on *Sins 2* after that – development only began in earnest just over a year ago – discussions were already happening. The *Minor Factions* DLC wasn't just a last hurrah for *Sins*: it was a hint at the future of the series.

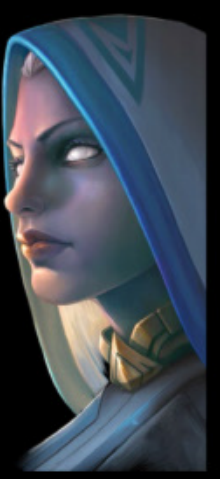
"We were always thinking, 'Let's do a testbed on this,'" says Ironclad co-owner Blair Fraser. "Since *Sins II* is going to come out, what would this look like?" The original *Sins* was "much, much more combat focused", but through the expansions the team was able to experiment more with diplomacy and NPC factions. And for *Sins II*, Ironclad has "gone to town" on that aspect of its cosmic conflict.

So while *Sins* always had the empire management that you'd expect from a 4X, it looks like it'll be a lot more evident this time, with more interactions that go beyond, as Fraser puts it, "just blowing up the enemy" in real-time space brawls. "*Sins II* is really the merging of what else we can do between tactical and high-level empire management that other people have requested and we never got around to doing." It's a product of 15 years of feedback and feature wish lists.

ABOVE: With this much protection, there must be something valuable in there.

DEADLY SINS

These new ways to interact with the galaxy represent, says Fraser, "One of the most important and largest changes to *Sins*." But all of them tie into the series' focus on the final X: exterminate. Even when you're not smashing big space armadas into other big space armadas, there are still plenty of opportunities to be incredibly aggressive.



So you might find yourself developing a rivalry with another player faction who you've got a treaty with. Maybe you needed some of their metal, or a planet they managed to snatch up before you, so you've come to an agreement and also entered into a ceasefire that won't let you attack for 20 minutes. But you want to conquer them eventually, and they probably feel the same way. That means you have to find other ways to undermine them. They might be

YOU CAN ALSO PLACE BOUNTIES ON SPECIFIC PLANETS, WHICH OTHER PLAYERS CAN THEN SEE

developing a relationship with one of the minor neutral factions, using their cultural influence to get perks and trading with them for vital resources. You could get in there and start competing, setting up your own deals or outbidding them in auctions that can net you bonuses, specific resources or even, in the case of pirate factions, a pirate raid that you can summon at any time to disrupt your enemies.

You can also place bounties on specific planets, which other players can then see. They'll know they can make 10,000 credits by attacking this planet for someone. So you can set up these bounties, save up some pirate raids, and then, when the 20-minute enforced ceasefire is over, you can unleash the raiders. And with peace broken, you can start sending your own fleets into the fray, backing up the pirates or targeting your enemy's trade routes. So you can do a lot of damage even if you're not being overtly aggressive until the final moment.

"So it's not just diplomacy," says Fraser. "It's, how can I screw these other people over in ways that are more indirect and with less pew pew involved? These are the kinds of things that I've always found more interesting." This sounds like it will add a welcome bit of texture to

HISTORY OF A SOLAR EMPIRE *Fifteen years of sin*

Sins of a Solar Empire
2008

Entrenchment
2009

Diplomacy
2009

Rebellion
2012

Forbidden Worlds
2013

Stellar Phenomena
2013

Outlaw Sectors
2016

Minor Factions
2018

Sins of a Solar Empire II (Early Access)
2022

PLANETS NOW ORBIT THEIR STARS, AND MOONS NOW ORBIT THEIR PLANETS

the conquest of the galaxy, but the space battles certainly haven't been pushed to the side. It's what made *Sins* stand out from both its contemporaries and, later, *Stellaris*, which went down the real-time route but didn't contain *Sins*' more granular focus on ship combat. That legacy remains important.

TURRET UP

This is clear from one of the big new features that Ironclad is currently touting, "You've got turrets that actually move and fire and acquire targets in real-time," Fraser explains. "If you remember *Sins 1* and the expansions, given the technology at the time, and the number of units we were using, we were only able to do four banks. All weapons in a bank had the same firing solutions and acquired the same targets. It was just a computational necessity."

Multi-threading was still new, and the limitations of 2008's technology forced Ironclad to keep things straightforward. But 15 years of advances have allowed the team to make individual turrets and fully-simulated missiles – things Fraser and his fellow designers wish they could have done before – a reality. "Not only does it look awesome, but from a tactical point of view, it introduces a whole bunch of new changes to the combat mechanics."

So now you've got point defence turrets "spinning and trying to track these things and shoot them down", and beefy capital ships with heavy armour blocking the missile fire and protecting the glass cannons in the back, which act more like 20th century artillery. The larger ships are like squads or small armies, with greater capabilities and flexibility, though you won't need to manually control each turret. And you'll still be able to eschew micromanagement by setting ships to autocast their abilities.

For fans of micro, however, there's more to play with and more to consider. Smart positioning of your ships, for instance, is a lot more crucial because ships and celestial objects now create line-of-sight wrinkles. Ironclad has also changed the system of counters and arbitrary bonuses, so instead of ships getting automatic bonuses against ships of a specific type, their performance is now determined by the properties of the offensive and defensive systems. To put it simply, "If you have heavy armour, anything that has armour penetration will do better against it than something that doesn't."

ORBITUARIES

The low-level tactical combat isn't the only thing that's going more granular and simulated. The galaxy itself has been given the same kind of love. Planets now orbit their stars, and moons now orbit their planets. "What this creates is a dynamic galaxy you have to plan around," Fraser says. The inspiration for this comes from an unlikely source: Buck Rogers – Battle for the 25th Century, an '80s board game based on the classic sci-fi romp. It wasn't a commercial success, but it certainly had an impact on Fraser, who still has the box sitting on his shelf.

TOP RIGHT: Different planet types yield different resources. In the market for some lava?

You won't need to squeeze into tight jumpsuits or show off your chest hair, but you will need to pay attention to celestial mechanics. As before, everything is linked up in a network of phase lanes, which determine where ships can travel to directly. But since all of these planets and moons now move, your plans will have to adapt. When a planet is closer to one of your occupied worlds, it might be a good time to launch an invasion or shore up your defences, and when they're further away you might want to focus on other things, like your economy or research. This alone feels incredibly novel, but where things get really interesting is how the motion of these worlds can screw you, or your foes, over.

Maybe there's a world you'd really like to snatch up, but it's heavily defended. In that case, you might be better off drawing the enemy fleet away by targeting a less appealing world. And as they are travelling to defend this world, you then grab your fleet and send them to your real target, but because you've been very clever and timed it just right, the enemy fleet can't follow you because the phase lane has shifted and there's no longer a direct route. This happens because planets move at different speeds depending on their proximity to the star, potentially turning them into an obstacle that temporarily severs connections between other worlds.

This sounds like it is pretty complicated, especially in a real-time game, but the UI lends a hand. "Every so often you should hold down the tactical view," Fraser recommends. "And you can see the projections of how the planets are moving. Currently, it's set to ten-minute intervals, so you can see where it's going to be ten minutes from now, but we may change that and give players the option to set how far they want to project." Planets are also colour-coded so you can tell if they're moving prograde or retrograde, as not every planet moves in the same direction.

These celestial mechanics also inform the rhythm of the conflict and how you'll build your empires. "In a typical game, we've tuned it so that players will start more on the outskirts," Fraser explains. "And because those clusters of planets move a lot slower, they tend to move in a much more cohesive cluster. So the core of your empire, the guts of it,

SPACE RACE

The factions fighting to dominate the galaxy

TEC

TEC space is the setting of *Sins II*, and this will be the only faction available when Early Access begins. Trade is their speciality, and when it comes to warfare they are experts at turtling.

VASARI

The remnants of a fallen alien empire, the Vasari were responsible for the formation of the TEC, which was set up to deal with the aliens when they entered Trader space.

ADVENT

The Advent is a psionically enhanced, pseudo-religious faction that was exiled from its homeworld by the Trade Order and is now out for revenge.

tends to be together for most of the game. At some point in the multi-hour state, they will break apart, but by that point, presumably, if you're winning, you've expanded your empire and you've got a separate front line anyway. But by design, and based on just a little bit of astronomy, the stuff closer to the star is much less stable. And that's where we'll tend to put the more valuable things. So you get these really interesting contests over these valuable resources and planets."

TREASURE PLANET

Exotic resources are among the most valuable because they're finite and necessary for things like special research projects, titan production, and the construction of starbases. You can find them in derelicts, sometimes, but also on planets. You might start an excavation on a desert world, for instance, and find treasures buried under the stand that will help improve the offensive capabilities of your fleet by upgrading your existing ships with new weapons. Conveniently, you can tell your scouts to search for specific things, making it easier to find precious resources, neutral factions, or whatever else you're eager to discover.

Objects closer to the star will still take around 30-45 minutes to do a full orbit, but that's also dependent on settings. Like the original *Sins*, you'll be able to make plenty of tweaks to the sequel, turning things off and on until you create a stellar battlefield that's just right.

Two topics have generated the most debate within Ironclad. The first is 3D movement. Having more than a 2D plane to work with is a seductive prospect, but this isn't *Homeworld*, with its exclusive focus on ships; *Sins* gives you an empire to manage, and heaping yet more complexity on top of what's already a pretty dense game is a risk. Like its predecessor, then, *Sins II* has stuck with 2D movement.

The other major subject of debate was the possibility of a campaign or discrete narrative elements like you'd see in *Stellaris* or *Endless Space 2*. Ultimately the pure sandbox approach won out – it's what Ironclad knows and what it's already seen success with. "That's not to say we're not very interested in the story of *Sins of a Solar Empire*," Fraser adds. "There's a very detailed story. It's infused in every ship's ability, all the research subjects, the look and feel of every element, every voice line that every character in the game speaks – the whole thing emits the story."

FAMILIAR FACES

Ironclad is also sticking with the setting of the original *Sins*, with the TEC, Advent, and Vasari continuing their squabble. *Sins II* is a retelling of the conflict, but sped up. You'll start with the original factions, who then splinter into the loyalists and rebels, and then as you expand you'll encounter features that were present in the *Entrenchment* expansion, and then the *Diplomacy* expansion, until you hit the brand new stuff unique to *Sins II*.

Each faction is distinct, from their metal harvesting rate to the fundamental systems that define them. The TEC, for instance, is the only one that can profit from trade lanes. It's their specialty, as the Trader Emergency Coalition, and the game takes place in TEC space. The trade system has also been given an upgrade, with greater sophistication and "more decision making"

> “YOU GET THESE REALLY INTERESTING CONTESTS OVER THESE VALUABLE RESOURCES AND PLANETS”

ABOVE: Each missile is simulated, and must be stopped by your point defence systems.

according to Fraser. You’re not just trading for cash now – everything is on the table. There was asymmetry in the original *Sins*, of course, but, he adds, “Given the scale of the game, we’ve leaned into it more.”

The more notable differences between factions and the complications of a galaxy that’s always in motion should be a boon for multiplayer, as well, which, along with modding, was one of the main reasons *Sins* enjoyed such longevity. It was a great singleplayer game, and that’s how I mostly played it, but it really came to life with PvP. And thanks to strides in tech, the Iron Engine 3 should hopefully be more capable of creating a smooth multiplayer conflict in *Sins II*, letting you, for instance, rejoin multiplayer matches without any faffing around. You’ll also be able to transfer control of your faction to another player if you don’t have time to finish the war.

After so many years I’m very keen to start conquering space again. There’s no release date quite yet, but Ironclad and publisher Stardock are letting us get our hands on it before the full launch, whenever that might be, through early access. That’ll kick off on October 27.

Sins II’s Early Access will start with much of what I’ve described on these pages, so you’ll be able to dabble in all the core systems, from trade to diplomacy to conquest. “This is the downside of a holistic design with all these systems,” says Fraser. “If you remove a single piece of it, other parts just don’t work. So we’ve got to put it all in, but just restrict the content, enough so that the systems operate but not to give away everything.”

So we’ll be putting a lot of systems through their paces, though notably only as the TEC and just in singleplayer. But given the scale of what Ironclad is attempting here, that should keep us entertained for quite some time. ■

SHINING STARS

We love a good space game – here are a few of our favourites

HOMEWORLD

This spaceship RTS holds up brilliantly, especially if you pick up the remastered version. The upcoming sequel looks great too.

AI WAR 2

This strategy game’s clever twist sees you trying to stealthily build up your forces while surrounded by overwhelming enemies.

HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER

Instead of blowing ships up by the dozen, try dismantling them as a blue collar space worker.

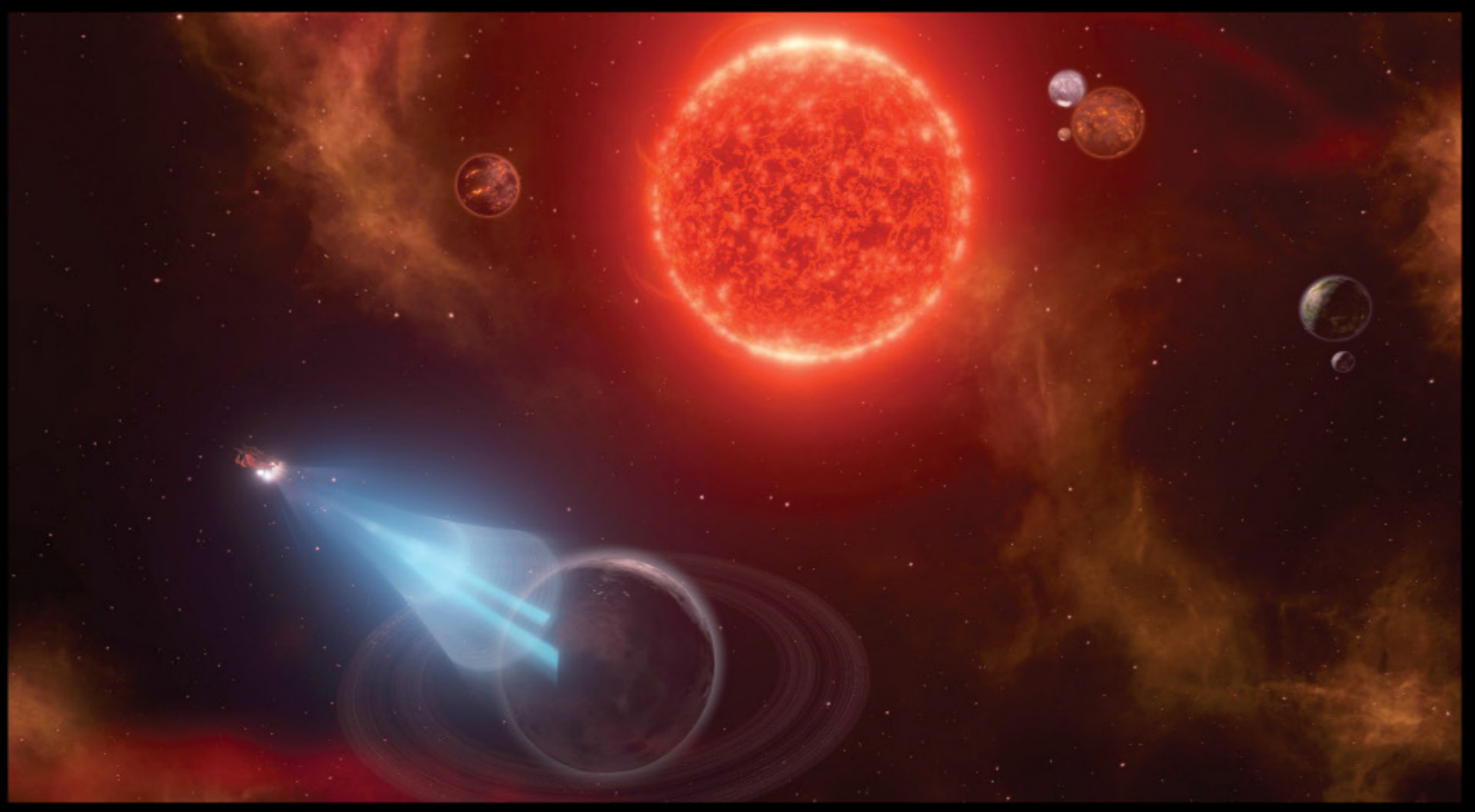
OUTER WILDS

Explore an oddly small solar system in a dinky little ship, while trapped in a time loop. Space has never felt so mysterious.

FOUR SCORE

The **BEST 4X GAMES** for today's discerning explorers, expanders, exploiters, and exterminators

By Leana Hafer



STELLARIS

RELEASED May 9, 2016 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox | **PUBLISHER** In-house

After six years, several expansions, and dozens of patches, Paradox's space 4X has aged like a fine alien wine. With a mind-boggling array of options to create anything from a profit-hungry megachurch of zealous interstellar geckos to a Terminator-style rogue AI, almost any sci fi trope you can imagine is at your fingertips. And various systems reworks and improvements mean there's never been a better time to spin up your drives.

What really sets *Stellaris* apart from other space 4X games is the depth of its society simulation, a staple of Paradox games. There is more abstraction going on here than some of the studio's other projects, but the fact that I can see what is causing so much crime on my forge worlds or be pressured to change my stance on planetary bombardment by a disgruntled political faction helps the galaxy come alive.

ENDLESS LEGEND

RELEASED Sep 18, 2014 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude Studios | **PUBLISHER** Sega, Iceberg Interactive

Endless Legend is one of the most memorable fantasy 4Xs ever, mainly because of its rich world lore and creative faction design. You want to play peaceful traders with mobile cities built on the backs of giant bugs? How about dragon people who get different bonuses based on the changing of the seasons? In a genre that can sometimes become bogged down by its own conventions, this game lets imagination run wild and isn't afraid to mix up the fundamentals.

SLIPWAYS

RELEASED June 3, 2021 | **DEVELOPER** Beetlewing | **PUBLISHER** In-house

An engrossing midway point between a 4X and a puzzle game, *Slipways* is great if you're looking for something a bit less busy and a bit more digestible. Like many games on this list, the basic idea is to create a sprawling space empire. You do this by creating connections called slipways between various planets with different input needs and resource outputs. Just when you think you've gotten it down, mid and late-game technologies come around that let you break almost every rule you were once held to. It's deceptively complex given the simplicity of its basic mechanics.

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VI

RELEASED October 20, 2016 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude | **PUBLISHER** Sega

I've seen people argue for pages and pages of forum threads about the best *Civilization* game. I've even participated in the melee now and then. The fact is, there are good reasons, even today, to nominate any of a small handful of the storied series' major entries as the best. But I'm going to skip all that and make things easy by just telling you to get *Civilization VI*. Do I still go back to the older ones? Of course. Are there things I think they do better than the latest edition? Sure.

But if you ask me which *Civ* game to buy in 2022 if you can only have one, the answer is fairly simple. *Civ VI* put a lot of focus on bringing the map to life, unfolding cities into sprawls of specialised districts and letting the terrain tell a story. These days, it usually comes bundled with the fascinating *Rise and Fall* and *Gathering Storm* expansions. One is about riding the metaphorical wave of a civilisations decline and resurgence, and the other is about riding the much more literal wave of climate change and rising sea levels.

IF YOU ASK ME WHICH CIV GAME TO BUY IN 2022 IF YOU CAN ONLY HAVE ONE, THE ANSWER IS FAIRLY SIMPLE

WARHAMMER 40,000: GLADIUS – RELICS OF WAR

RELEASED August 17, 2021 | **DEVELOPER** Proxy Studios | **PUBLISHER** Slytherine

A Warhammer 40K 4X seems like a bit of an odd idea at first, given that the various races of the 41st Millennium are typically much more interested in the 'exterminate' part and not the other three Xs. But even though it might lean a bit more heavily toward being a wargame, *Gladius – Relics of War* ends up being quite the dynamic and detailed turn-based experience. There's plenty here to satisfy anyone's craving for a higher-level, operational perspective on the Emperor's finest.

HUMANKIND

RELEASED August 17, 2021 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude | **PUBLISHER** Sega

After making a name for themselves with *Endless Legend* and *Endless Space*, Amplitude set out to make a much more direct competitor to *Civilization*. The premise is the same: You lead a group of humans on a procedurally-generated map from the Stone Age to the Space Age. The big change here is that you don't play as the same civilisation in every era, with each step on your journey coming with a new set of clothes and a new set of bonuses. You might start as the Assyrians and end up as the French. Don't ask me how, exactly. History can be unpredictable.

AGE OF WONDERS: PLANETFALL

RELEASED August 6, 2019 | **DEVELOPER** Triumph Studios | **PUBLISHER** Paradox

If you like a little more tactical control in your space war, *Age of Wonders: Planetfall* includes an overarching 4X layer alongside *XCOM*-style tactical battles. So when your squad of futuristic soldiers or dinosaur-riding Amazons (yes, that's a thing) meets the enemy on campaign, you get to zoom in and command each unit individually. There is an auto-resolve option, of course, if you have more important space things to do. But what's remarkable is that *Planetfall* is essentially two different games, and they somehow both work really well, individually and together.

FALLEN ENCHANTRESS: LEGENDARY HEROES

RELEASED May 22, 2013 | **DEVELOPER** Stardock | **PUBLISHER** In-house

Fallen Enchantress is another interesting hybrid, combining elements of 4X and the classic swords-and-sorcery fantasy RPG. Your faction leader, called a sovereign, can embark on quests and be deployed to aid in many aspects of running your realm, beyond merely serving as a general in pitched battles. Your armies are also highly customisable, and you can expect to see almost any kind of fantasy creatures you can imagine scattered across its world.

TERRA INVICTA

RELEASED September 26, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Pavonis Interactive | **PUBLISHER** Hooded Horse

Created by the team that made the fan favourite *Long War* mods for *XCOM 1* and *2*, *Terra Invicta* sets out to answer the question: What would *XCOM* be like as a 4X game? It takes place on a very detailed map of the solar system that includes not just every major nation on Earth in 2022, but all of the planets all the way out to ice dwarfs and some of the larger asteroids beyond the orbit of Pluto.

It's an exceptionally dense game, involving everything from sending agents to the various nations on Earth to gather support for your cause, to setting up mining colonies on the moons of Saturn to provide precious metals for your space fleet. There is currently only one scenario, set in 2022, but a further two are planned: one set at the height of the Cold War, and one where the aliens show up when we already have a stronger foothold beyond our home planet.

ENDLESS SPACE 2

RELEASED May 18, 2017 | **DEVELOPER** Amplitude | **PUBLISHER** Sega

In some ways, it's easy to see *Endless Space 2* as the interstellar direct counterpart to *Endless Legend*. They share some lore elements, as well as the wacky, rule-breaking faction design. There is one faction simply called The Horatio made up entirely of clones of one guy named Horatio. You can even play as extradimensional aliens. Even after many playthroughs, I'm still finding new events and stories that shape the destiny of my galactic civilisation.

DUNE: SPICE WARS

RELEASED August 26, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Shiro Games | **PUBLISHER** Funcom

Currently in Early Access, *Spice Wars* was actually in development before the announcement of the recent Dune film, so don't go in expecting a direct tie-in or Jason Momoa. What you can expect is an RTS/4X hybrid set on a semi-randomised map of Arrakis where several factions duke it out over the all important spice. Get it? Duke? Like, Duke Leto... never mind. It's got sandworms. It's got deadly expanses of hostile desert. It's got something called the CHOAM that is much more important in the books. It's one of the Dune-est *Dune* games to ever Dune.

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS IV

RELEASED August 13, 2013 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis | **PUBLISHER** 2K

Other than *Stellaris*, *EU4* is the Paradox game that most effectively checks all of the 4X boxes. It's still definitely a grand strategy as well, meaning there will be much more detailed economics, diplomacy, and political mechanics than you may be used to in a game like *Civilization*. But the goals are fairly similar: leading your nation to wealth and glory by exploration, conquest, and developing new technologies.

It's set in the years between 1444 and 1821, encompassing the Age of Discovery, the European Renaissance, the Columbian Exchange, and all the way up to the Napoleonic Era. You can play as any country on Earth, from the Teutonic Knights to the Navajo Nation, each with their own set of opportunities and challenges. There's a lot to get a handle on, and you'll need to understand all the tools available to you to succeed.

CUTS DOWN ON A LOT OF THE BUSYWORK OTHER 4X GAMES TEND TO ACCUMULATE

OLD WORLD

RELEASED July 1, 2021 | **DEVELOPER** Mohawk Games | **PUBLISHER** Hooded Horse

Most historical 4X games try to model all of history. Or, at least, all of the parts between when we decided cities were cool and when we decided it would be even cooler to have cities on other planets. *Old World*, instead, focuses on the ancient Mediterranean, putting you in control of factions from Rome to Egypt to the Hittities. It has a lot in common with *Civilization*, as its creator was also the lead designer on *Civ IV*. But it also borrows elements from some newer strategy games, like a character system similar to *Crusader Kings*.

One of its biggest innovations is the orders system, which limits how many units you can move per turn. This effectively cuts down on a lot of the busywork other 4X games tend to accumulate, especially later on, while also allowing smaller militaries who have committed a lot to the orders resource to outfight larger ones with less ability to command their troops. The tight historical focus also lends itself to a rich depiction of the era. Event-driven drama between leaders and major families within your civilisation mix things up, so even if you're just playing the Greeks for the 100th time, you'll never know what to expect.

CIVILIZATION: BEYOND EARTH

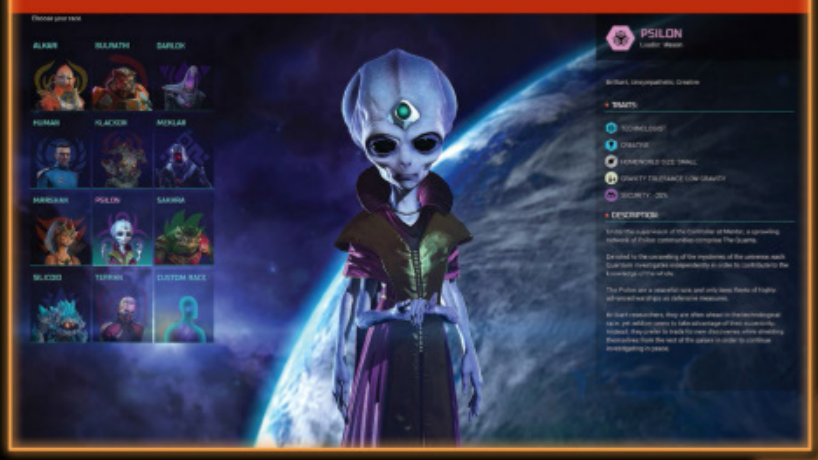
RELEASED October 23, 2014 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis | **PUBLISHER** 2K

A spin-off from Sid's main series, *Beyond Earth* is like a high-budget *Civilization V* mod that picks up after a standard game left off. In the not so distant future, we've gone and ruined the Earth – good going, us – and several human factions are now looking for a new home on other planets. Adapting to alien terrain, flora, and fauna pushes you down one of three distinct tech paths: genetic modification, AI, or good ol' human gumption. I had mixed feelings about Beyond Earth when it came out, but every time I've gone back to it since, I've had a surprisingly fun time.

MASTER OF ORION

RELEASED February 26, 2016 | **DEVELOPER** NGD Studios | **PUBLISHER** Wargaming Labs

Master of Orion II is one of the most groundbreaking 4X games of all time. But if you were to go back to it today... sadly, it doesn't quite hold up. However, the 2016 reboot of the franchise features very similar gameplay with a much better interface and many modern quality-of-life features, so it could at least give you some idea how mindblowing the originals were back in the day. It's still worth a spin, if only for the voice acting from some sci-fi legends like Michael Dorn and Alan Tudyk.



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PC GAMER

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

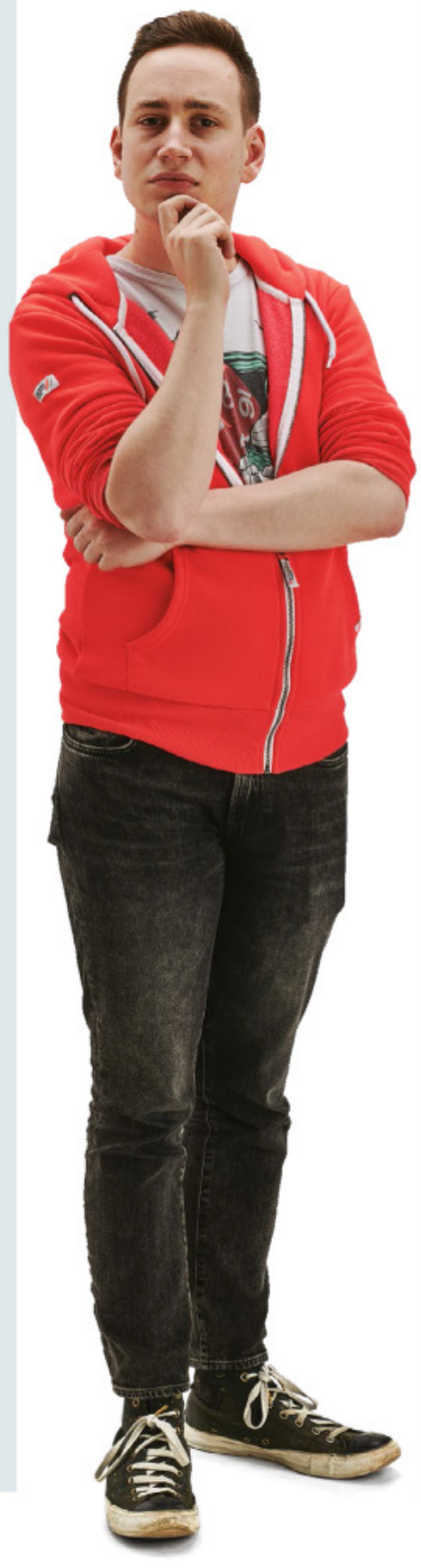
95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Point taken

What a treat it is, in 2022, to have three great, modern point-and-click adventure games in our review section: *Return to Monkey Island*, *The Excavation of Hob's Barrow,* and *Sunday Gold*. I'm not a man overly susceptible to nostalgia, but there's something for me about the genre that is just inextricably a part of the soul of PC gaming. Even during the years it lay 'dead', its influence constantly broke through, inspiring interactions and puzzles in everything from sprawling RPGs to big-budget detective games. Even at is most dormant, it always seem inevitable to me that it would eventually resurge, but even I couldn't have predicted how complete that resurrection would be. Now, in 2022, we have an embarrassment of point-and-click riches, both harking back to the past and pushing the concept forward into the future. Lovely stuff.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer

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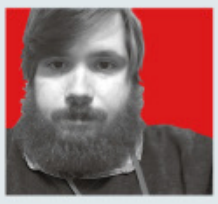
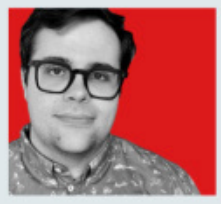


KAILE HULTNER
Specialist in
Musical murder
Currently playing
Metal: Hellsinger
This month
Conducted a screaming symphony in Hell with a gun as their baton. *Metal.*

IAN EVENDEN
Specialist in
Real barrows
Currently playing
The Excavation of Hob's Barrow
This month
Took a trip to the true heart of darkness: the English countryside.

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Souls-like-likes
Currently playing
Soulstice
This month
Waged a silent war against great evils: invisible walls and a dodgy camera.



TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Monday silver
Currently playing
Sunday Gold
This month
Learned the best way out of a Star Wars-style trash compactor scenario.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Bright ideas
Currently playing
Resident Evil Revelations 2
This month
Discovered how useful a mate with a torch is in a horror game.

MONKEY BUSINESS

Is RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND worth the three-decade wait?

By Will Freeman

The infamously bewildering ending to 1991's *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* left players longing for resolution that subsequent *Monkey Island* games never delivered. Three decades later, and after effectively saying it would likely never happen, key members of the original *Monkey Island* team – including series creator Ron Gilbert – have finally made the game that picks up after the closing moments of *LeChuck's Revenge*.

Return to Monkey Island's mischievous opening confidently asserts that this is the authentic *Monkey Island* experience we've come for: sharp, self-aware, and brilliantly silly. It'll bombard you with gags, but the characters you meet are more than comedic props, and the cunning stream of interwoven puzzles has been modernised to keep the pace up without losing the satisfaction of problem solving. It's a massive success.

The story is consistently engrossing and energetic

AGE BEFORE BOOTY

The opening prologue whips you through an homage to classic *Monkey Island* moments before thrusting the shambling Threepwood back into his past. Older, tireder, and more challenged by holding his breath, Guybrush has grown in tandem with us, as have *Monkey Island*'s classic characters and locales. Everything and everyone here has gone on a journey. Wally the cartographer has been reshaped by finding his confidence without losing his charming spirit. Even LeChuck seems to have found a softer side despite remaining the furiously irritated villain we adore.

Everything is different but familiar in *Return to Monkey Island*, from its characters and narrative to its revised systems for interaction and puzzle solving. It can temporarily transport you to the '90s, but it isn't stuck there. The story is consistently engrossing and energetic, but spoiling too many details would be beneath LeChuck himself, so I'll keep things general.

After starting out in the first game's Mêlée Island, Guybrush takes to the seas to explore vintage locations such as Monkey Island itself, as well as entirely new lands including the tormented, eerie Terror Island and Brrr Muda, a place inspired by the Viking age. Guybrush is once more in pursuit of Monkey Island's infamous secret. LeChuck, too, has returned to the quest. And both, of course, remain besotted by Elaine Marley. Neither, though, has gained any real sense of what the secret of Monkey Island actually is.

All that is the same, but with the passage of time new figures have risen to power, upsetting the traditions and conventions of Guybrush's world. The old guard of established sea dogs now exist on the fringes, replaced by youthful upstarts eager to reset the rulebook. Even voodoo is no longer in favour, with younger generations favouring 'dark magic' in its place.

A great many of *Return to Monkey Island*'s best moments come from the new characters, who are almost universally brilliant. Highlights include the oddly charismatic Putra, undead galley chef to LeChuck, who serves both rasping sass and all manner of delightfully gross food gag set-ups as she gradually develops an affection for Guybrush. Or there's Mêlée's Town's new locksmith, Locke Smith. Deliberately absurd name aside, Locke is stern and cool to the bone, and endures Guybrush at best, delivering all kinds of opportunities for laughs as she dismisses the protagonist's puns about 'locks' of hair, or extinguishes his enthusiasm for treasure hunting as he is bewildered by a map lacking any X to mark the spot.

This is a game constructed from the familiar as much as the new, of course. Much of *Return to Monkey Island* is built from settings that have undergone a subtle revolution. Visit this game's version of the Scumm Bar, and at a glance everything appears the same. The overall composition is unchanged, right down to where people are seated. But let your eyes linger just a little longer, and it's apparent the original scene has been entirely reskinned. The odd broken pane of glass in a window suggests plenty of pirate misbehaviour still takes place, but the Scumm Bar is not the tattered dive it once was. The once stained, pockmarked walls have been given a lick of vibrant paint, framed art hangs everywhere, and new clientele demand more ornate meals. Meanwhile, the new locations in *Return to Monkey Island* are original by nature, but couple perfectly with the series' established tone and lore.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A bright, knowingly daft point-and-click adventure that picks up after 1991's *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*

EXPECT TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
Terrible Toybox

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital, Lucasfilm Games

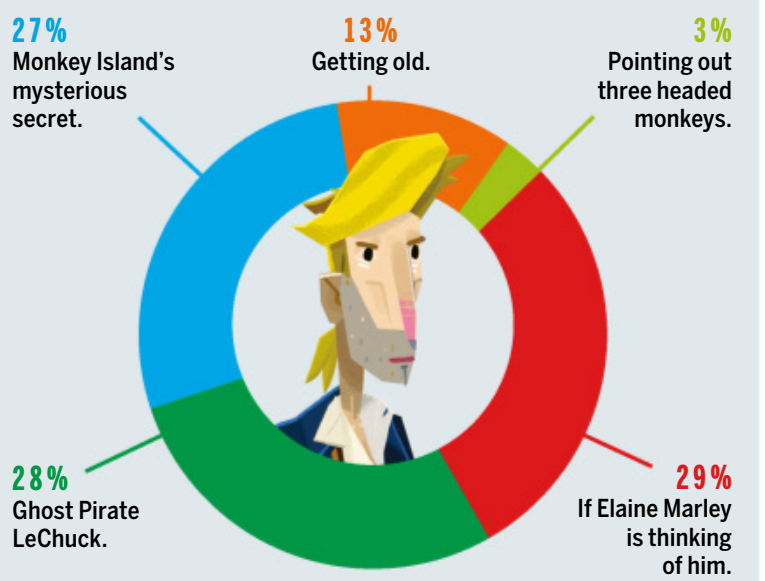
REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-8550U, GeForce MX150, 16GB RAM

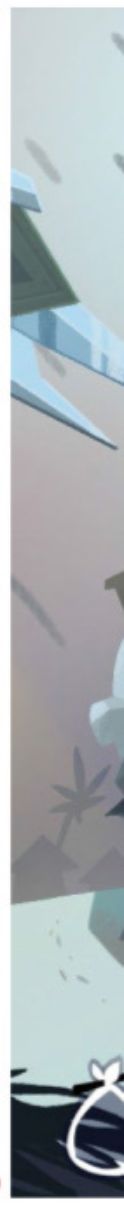
MULTIPLAYER
No

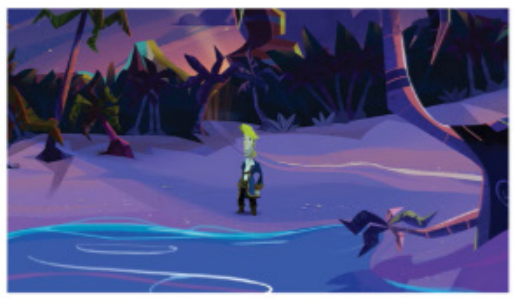
LINK
bit.ly/3UPo0X9

INSIDE GUYBRUSH'S MIND

A thinking ship







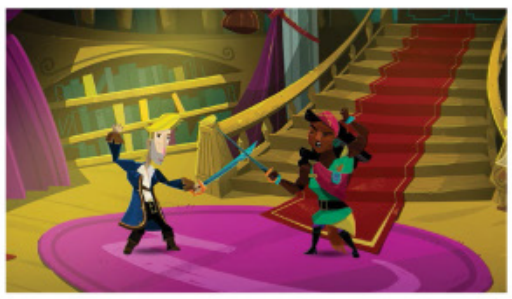
FAR LEFT: Contextual cursor text brings a smart blend of functionality and personality.

LEFT: Same old Mêlée Island; different perspective.

The new locations are some of this game's best, and feel very much in the *Monkey Island* tradition.

FAR RIGHT: As you progress through the game, it's world opens up considerably.

BELOW: So often individual scenes are brilliantly composed, framed and lit.



BACK TO THE FUT-ARRRR

The overall design hasn't evolved profoundly: this is a straightforward point-and-click adventure game that plays just as genre devotees expect. Conversing with the game's cast delivers the story, nudges you in the right direction, and seeds your mind with goals and hints, guiding you through puzzles that see you variously hunt down keys, outwit those who stand in your way, extract information from the environments, and unpick a path to whatever Monkey Island's secret might be.

But while this is a conventional point-and-click at a fundamental level, that's not to say it lacks inspiration. Far from it, there's an abundance of clever ideas, and fresh-feeling puzzles with a playful spirit. Your inventory soon fills with all manner of eccentric items, from books of undead (and awful) poetry, avocado-based grog alternatives, and a few too many abandoned human skulls. Many of *Return*'s finest puzzles, meanwhile, are those anchored primarily in conversation. One of the most memorable asks that you learn to spin a good pirating tale by determinedly reeling off badly delivered stories to unimpressed characters across the game world. Their feedback helps you hone your craft: a puzzle about writing in a game that is all about its writing.

For those who just want to enjoy the world and humour, there's a Casual mode that simplifies the puzzles and emphasises the narrative. The more significant change to me, though, is the addition of contextual action descriptions. Hover over interactive objects, and the description of what you can do provides much more flavour than in past games. Whereas previously you might have got 'pick up' text when hovering over all manner of objects in the Scumm Bar's kitchen, now two pointers might appear that are specific to an individual item. Hover over the chef's mop, for example, and 'admire the mop' appears as an option for the left mouse button, while 'surreptitiously abscond with the mop' is displayed with a symbol for the right click.

It's a subtle tweak, but the additional text does much more than simply inject more delightful personality, tone and laughs into a game already rich in those things. The extra context doesn't make puzzle solving any easier, but it does provide more explicit information on what clicks might lead to, helping keep progression through the game more pacy and engaging.

Then there's the hint system. It can be ignored by those who want the satisfaction of getting themselves unstuck, but for those of us who would normally head to Google, the in-game hints maintain immersion in the world. It's much better than pulling up an external guide, and you can choose how subtle or explicit the clues you digest are.

The most obvious and contentious modernisation is the art

The most obvious and contentious modernisation is the art. Yes, it's not pixelated. But this is a *Monkey Island* for 2022, and the look suits Gilbert's world tremendously. Almost every screen bristles with more to see than is first apparent – incidental animated background moments such as busy columns of ants in the undergrowth, for example – making each island feel like a living place. The occasional shooting star feels like a detail from a '90s game, but looks contemporary. There are some gorgeous lighting effects and the scenes are framed exquisitely.

Importantly, the art is also functional: items and details pop, and the way forward is never too obvious nor too obscure. There's no accounting for taste. If you don't like the art, you don't like it. But it works.

SOUNDS PERFECT?

The audio too, is remarkable, reworking the classic score with variety and energy. The sound effects – from muttered conversations just off-screen to audiobeds rich in detail – are equally wonderful, creating a sense of space in the 2D scenes.

Its faults are mostly surface level things. Selecting or interacting with items in the inventory can be clunky and imprecise, and a shade too many puzzles send you back and forth across the entire game world. While the voice acting is largely outstanding, on very rare occasions lines seem to fall ever so slightly late, perhaps a quirk of the technology that lies beneath.

None of that should deter *Monkey Island* fans. Those who haven't played the *Monkey Island* games, however, may want to heed the implication of the title. You don't need to get the in-jokes to enjoy the story, and there's a surprisingly engrossing interactive scrapbook that provides a lively summary of the series' previous events, but to really enjoy *Return to Monkey Island* is to titter at the self-referential gags, or roll your eyes knowingly at Guybrush's deliberately bad lines and choices. Walking into a familiar building to find an unexpected interior is only delightful if you know the existing lore. Half of the fun is in getting the jokes or references before they're even fully revealed.

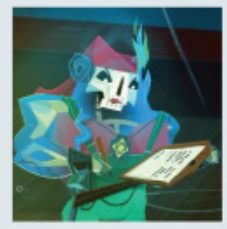
As a *Monkey Island* fan, it's hard for me to imagine what a newcomer's experience would be like. But for those lifelong followers of Guybrush's misadventures, this is as good as it's been for a very long time: funny, captivating, superbly paced, contemporary, and packed with neat ideas and eccentric characters. This is what we've been waiting for since LeChuck and Guybrush emerged from... well. If you know, you know. And if you don't, it's time to go back to the originals. ■

LECHUCK'S NEW CREW

Undead and unstoppable

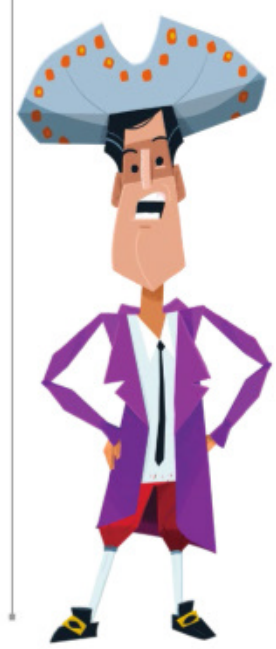
FLAIR GOREY

- Is as hard as tungsten nails.
- No time for Guybrush's nonsense.
- LeChuck's theme tune composer.
- Might secretly like Guybrush.



IRON ROSE

- Quartermaster who keeps the crew in check.
- A lifetime devotee to LeChuck...
- ...but prone to crises of faith.
- Might secretly like Guybrush.



PC GAMER VERDICT

A return to the *Secret of Monkey Island* series' best that brilliantly modernises the point-and-click form.

92

SMALL MAN SYNDROME

TINYKIN's minion management might be shallow, but its platforming shines

By Lincoln Carpenter

Let's get the disappointment done first. In *Tinykin*, you play a teensy interstellar traveller who commands a legion of microscopic minions to navigate an oversized environment, and yet it's not the PC-compatible *Pikmin* that I was hoping for. Take a deep breath with me. If we do our mourning now, we can appreciate *Tinykin* for what it is: a delightful, laidback platformer romp through a world lovingly rendered from a bug's-eye view.

You play as Milodane, a researcher from a distant planet so far in the future that its human populace doesn't remember where they came from. When Milo activates an experimental transporter to seek humanity's interstellar origins, he isn't just stranded on another world – he shrinks to miniature scale, too. Milo awakens in the House, an abandoned '90s-era home populated by insects who remember the House's original owner as an absent deity, and the Tinykin, a race of enigmatic gremlins who respond to Milo's commands. Your goal's a simple one: using your Tinykin, gather six components from the House's bug societies, and reassemble a machine to teleport home.

Tinykin's inspirations are clear from the first moment a handful of your Tinykin are ordered into place with a familiar whistle, marching along to synchronised "hut-hut-hut" grunts. But mechanically the similarities here are short-lived.

Yes, you're flinging dozens of Tinykin to solve all your problems

Where *Pikmin* is a remixed RTS, *Tinykin* is a 3D platformer more in line with something like *Banjo Kazooie*, with an even more easygoing vibe.

Yes, you're flinging dozens of Tinykin to solve all your problems. But there's no real decision making involved, because there's no way to use them incorrectly. You can't waste or endanger them or accidentally drown a whole squad and feel terrible about yourself. At first, it surprised me how little thought they demanded: the only logic involved is whether or not you have enough Tinykin to handle the obstacle immediately in front of you. Where *Pikmin* has you considering how to invest your forces, *Tinykin* only expects you to passively gather them.

Luckily, Milo himself feels great enough to control that I was happy with my Tinykin occupying a supporting role. He's got a limited-time bubble glider for floating across gaps. In place of a sprint you're given immediate access to a 'soapboard' to skate across the House's solid surfaces – and it has a spammable kickflip button. Fun!

Whether you're platforming or hurling Tinykin, Milo's snappy and responsive. Jumping, running, and deploying his bubble glider are all blessedly free from the kind of fumbling that's all too common in platforming elsewhere. No stumbling over inexplicable geometry collisions, no missed jumps I was convinced I'd make. Movement in *Tinykin* feels clean and satisfying, without any frustrations to make moving through its spaces anything less than a pleasure. And that's great, because the House's spaces are delightful.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D platformer with a *Pikmin*-ish flavour

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

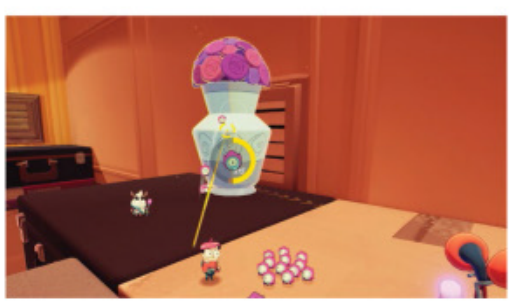
DEVELOPER
Splashteam

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7 8700K, NVIDIA GeForce RTX 3070

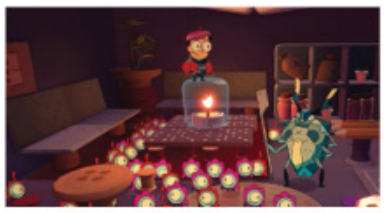
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3UFS8UZ



TOP: This is a Titanic reference. Don't think about it too deeply.

Stackable green Tinykin offer some sweeping views.



BLESS THIS MESS

The House is *Tinykin*'s real star. Its rooms house different sections of bug society, each a self-contained level with its own atmosphere. *Tinykin*'s environmental art gets incredible mileage from the joy of seeing household objects rearranged into insect-scale geography.

From fields splayed out across kitchen-floor farmland, to thumbtack furniture in food-tin apartment blocks, *Tinykin* is dense with visuals. To me, these were the main reward for navigating all its nooks and crannies, because, the actual collectibles you gather in *Tinykin*'s rooms aren't strong motivators.

My time in *Tinykin* wasn't without complaints. Milo himself doesn't carry enough charisma to feel integral, leaving me wondering why I wasn't, y'know, a cool ladybug with infinite kickflips. But even where it stumbles, *Tinykin* delivers the childlike glee of clambering over a small thing that's suddenly very big. That's clearly the goal, and *Tinykin* doesn't overstretch its ambitions. It's a joyful, laidback six-or-so hours of platforming in a vibrant little world. No more, no less. ■

TOP: Clumps of pollen serve as the basic collectible.

RIGHT: Moth larva unlock silk thread shortcuts to grind on.

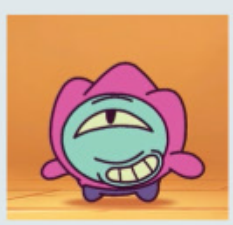
PC GAMER VERDICT

Inspired by *Pikmin*, *Tinykin* offers up a big little world that manages delight without needing much depth.

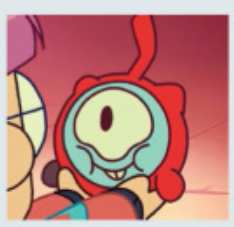
78

FRIENDS IN SMALL PLACES

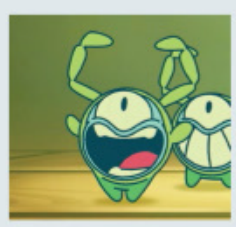
A helpful handbook for identifying Tinykin



PURPLE TINYKIN
Designated bruisers. Penchant for hauling, heaving, hefting, hurling, being hurled.



RED TINYKIN
Hand-grenade homunculi. Explode on impact. Not reclaimable.



GREEN TINYKIN
Deployable scaffolding. Sturdy. Stackable. Spectacular.

BLUE TINYKIN
Unsettling electrophiles. Strung into circuits. Left in place forever.

YELLOW TINYKIN
Ready-made ramps. Technically useful. Supposedly, loved just as much.

THE DEADLY RHYTHM

METAL: HELLSINGER has a bone to pick with damnation... and a few to break

By Kaile Hultner

The first time I ever listened to Swedish hardcore band Refused's seminal 1998 album, The Shape of Punk to Come, my brain leaked out of my ears. It is a major reason why extreme music sounded like it did in the 2000s, the connective tissue between generations of hardcore and metal. In a similar vein, The Outsiders' *Metal: Hellsinger* tries to connect high-octane first-person shooting and rhythm gameplay with metal.

Rhythm FPSes are a relatively new phenomenon that might best be described as an unholy union between *Doom* and *Crypt of the Necrodancer*. Only a handful of games even currently exist in this nascent genre, and it's not hard to see some striking similarities between them. What makes *Metal: Hellsinger* stand apart is the quality of its soundtrack and its slower gameplay.

On the soundtrack front, every song in the game is written and performed by Two Feathers, a heavily accomplished musician duo-slash-game music production house whose previous work features in *Battlefield 4* and *Warhammer: Vermintide II*. The tunes are rock-solid and easily identifiable as metal, so if you were worried that the game might not be brutal enough, put your fears to bed there. The pièce de résistance here, however, is the guest vocals.

Each track, which represents a different circle of Hell and its associated Torments, features a different acclaimed metal vocalist. So, for example, you might be travelling through the snowy mountain wasteland of Voke and hear the growls and snarls of Dark Tranquility's Mikael Stanne. Another level, Acheron, is overwhelmed by the voice of Lamb of God's Randy Blythe. Other guests include Refused's Dennis Lyxzén, Tatiana Shmayluk from Jinjer, Matt Heafy from Trivium, and the lead vocalist of System of a Down, Serj Tankian.

The diverse spectrum of metal screamers on this soundtrack leads to the whole affair taking on a kind of chameleon-esque aspect. The album retains its own identity while also slightly taking on the shape of the music its guest vocalists are most known for. It's an interesting sampler, and by far the most unique video game soundtrack out this year. But how does the music mesh with the actual gameplay?

The pièce de résistance here, however, is the guest vocals

RATHER BE DEAD

Players will detect the *Doom* DNA in *Metal: Hellsinger* almost immediately: paths that lead to big arenas where you have to kill everything in order to move on; elite enemies that require more than just shooting to take down; waves of cannon fodder that provide health and a boost to your ever-present Fury meter.

The rhythm gameplay becomes a factor here as well, as you have to shoot to the beat in order to maintain your combos and keep your Fury up as high as possible. Trying to go too fast will have you stumbling, while going too slow will result in you getting got by some random minion. Instead, the game focuses on deliberateness, taking the 'rip and tear' mindset from *Doom* seriously, and brutally dominating any lesser demon who gets in your way. If only the story were as laser-sharp.

You play an aggrieved lost soul – the Unknown – on a warpath of vengeance through the nine circles of Hell armed with a sword, a talking skull, and an infernal arsenal of demonic weaponry with powerful ultimate moves and unique ways to keep the troubled skies raining blood. Throughout her crusade, she faces aspects of the Red Judge, the Devil herself, as the latter tries to strike the former down before she rips Hell asunder.

In theory, this works great as the narrative backdrop between murderfests. In practice, the story quickly gets bogged down. *Metal: Hellsinger*'s narrator is that talking skull the Unknown carries with her, and he sounds like he should be narrating a 2007 Built Ford Tough commercial. He's also maybe an Archangel? And the Unknown is connected to some kind of apocalyptic prophecy? And the Red Judge is actually – no, this would be a massive spoiler. Ultimately, the story is the weakest part of the game, a sour note in an otherwise perfectly brutal melody. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
You got your *Soundfall* in my *Dusk*!

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
The Outsiders

PUBLISHER
Funcom

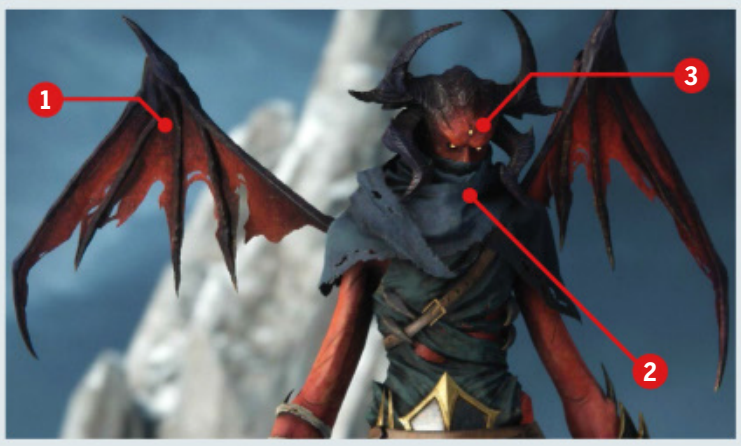
REVIEWED ON
AMD Aerith 0405 2.8 GHz; AMD Van Gogh 0405 GPU, 16GB RAM (Steam Deck 256GB)

MULTIPLAYER
No, but there IS a global leaderboard

LINK
metalhellsinger.com

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Meet the game's demonic main character



1 WINGS Tattered wings carry the Unknown on infernal air currents through the Hells to ruin someone's day.

2 VOICE With no voice, the Unknown can't scream. That's why she's forcibly remodelling the underworld in blood.

3 THIRD EYE A third eye helps the Unknown see through the Red Judge's absolute nonsense.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Manages to entertain despite its lacklustre story, because of a great soundtrack and rhythmic FPS gameplay.

78

FAR LEFT: Alas! Poor Yorick. Or, uh, Paz.

BELOW: That awkward moment when everyone gets too close at the party.

TUMP IN THE NIGHT

In THE EXCAVATION OF HOB'S BARROW, you'll dig up more than just secrets

By Ian Evenden

What's special about Thomasina Bateman? A protective talisman, perhaps? An alien embryo shot into her brain? She doesn't have nightmares, at least not at the start of the game. Perhaps she's a v... no, let's not go there, though she's not a police officer either. Whatever it is, it's brought her to a town in England which, on the surface, appears normal, the residents going about their rural business.

Thomasina is a modern Victorian antiquarian, summoned to the village of Bewlay by a letter from one Leonard Shoulder, who readers of last month's preview will be relieved to hear has been found. Hob's Barrow has been excavated too, giving up its secrets at the point of a trowel. And what has she discovered?

Wonderful things. Though recognising this requires looking past the art style. The woodlands and moors of the early game are a rendered mess of pixels that can struggle to coalesce, while sprites can blur badly. Underground the look comes together, all stone blocks and curious pink lighting. The graphics are a deliberate choice by the developer and match its earlier titles such as *Sumatra: Fate of Yandi* and, to be positive, the hand-drawn look certainly has plenty of charm.

And atmosphere too. This is the game's strong point, its folk horror roots digging into the earth to drag out a creepy, monstrous story with a dark conclusion. There's very little gore or jump scares, but consideration of what transpires, and its implications for the wonderfully voiced villagers, is a subtle horror.

The character of Thomasina adds greatly to this. She's stoic, her favourite phrases are 'curses!' and 'hogwash!', and she will not take advice. She doesn't back down when faced with the supernatural or – content warning – discussion of suicide. She isn't afraid of banging on people's doors to demand help. She might even be the sort who answers the telephone, had they been invented yet. You'd almost think there was something about Thomasina that tied her to events in this place she's never been before.

The graphics are a deliberate choice by the developer

FOLK HERO

We're with her as she explores the village, fetching items for villagers so they'll impart information or give up an item, battling against silence and misinformation. Near the game's conclusion she expresses a single moment of self-doubt, as to whether what she sees is real, but is otherwise indefatigable. If she gave up we'd have been robbed of the chance to solve puzzles that require translation from Latin, references to diagrams, juggling apples, and paying attention.

A sudden narrative choice to tell, not show, means the ending feels rushed. Not that this alters the twist – an event occurs that left me staring open-mouthed at my monitor, unsure whether it would have had more impact had it been my mouse pointer directly behind events, rather than watching (and hearing) it play out passively before a fade to black.

It also means we're denied what could have been a great cutaway reveal. Throughout its runtime, the game delights in switching away from the low-res action to show a more detailed picture of a particularly weird, gruesome or important sight. That it does not do this when it should be at the height of its powers, preferring a black screen with a line of white text, is infuriating.

The game also leaves questions behind, most characters not receiving a conclusion. We can assume they followed either of the two paths left by their more fortunate neighbours, but the game is driven by a need to know what happened next. The amount of foreshadowing packed into the first third pushes you to discover how these clearly significant but obscure events could possibly be linked, so to have answers snatched away seems unfair. An epilogue would have been nice.

Hob's Barrow is a haunting tale of one woman's determination to succeed and of a conspiracy to twist her work in a most hellish way. There is something special about Thomasina Bateman, and it has led to a rather special game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A peculiarly British folk horror point-and-click adventure game

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Cloak and Dagger Games

PUBLISHER
Wadjet Eye

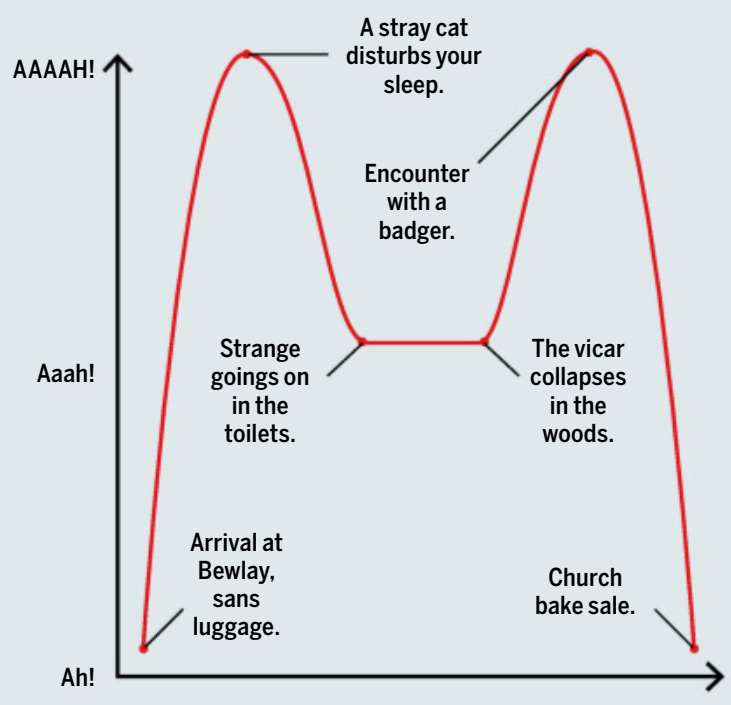
REVIEWED ON
Threadripper 2950x, 64GB RAM, RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cadgames.weebly.com

GRAPH OF HORROR

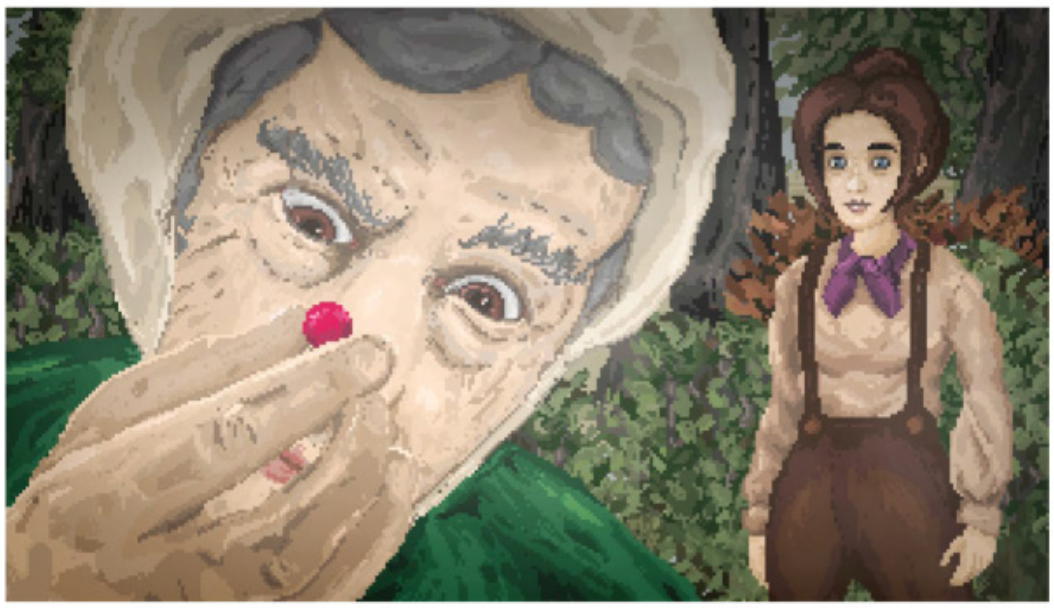
Sheer terror, summed up in a line



PC GAMER VERDICT

A splendid experience that's well paced, excellently voiced, and doesn't outstay its welcome.

78



FAR LEFT: Mother Mildred squeezes a spot on the end of her nose.

LEFT: Stanley the barman is an amiable fellow.

BELOW: It's a misty day in the village, and you are a horrible archaeologist.

SISTER SISTER

DMC meets *Dark Souls* in grungy action adventure SOULSTICE

By Tom Sykes

The original *Devil May Cry* is one of the stranger developments in games. It started life as a *Resident Evil* title, but morphed into a pseudo-fighting-game complete with combos and flashy aerial attacks – and yet it kept the horror setting and fixed camera angles. Recent entries take place in fully 3D worlds, and have downplayed the horror element – but what if they hadn't? Scrappy *DMC*-like *Soulstice* is here to answer that question.

Where *Devil May Cry* has become more OTT and comedic over the years, *Soulstice* is dark, dour, and drenched in a grim, medieval atmosphere. In terms of aesthetic it resembles a less cheery *Dark Souls*, without even the fleeting glimpse of an onion knight or an incandescent sun to offer moments of warmth and beauty. What's left is a ruinous settlement – the towering city of Ilden – filled with transformed citizens and monsters from the void. Playing as Briar the Ashen Knight, and her spectral sister Lute, you have to enter the city and close the breach, to save the world.

Soulstice's story lives in an awkward place, sprinkling moments of melodrama atop a thin, simple plot that never stretches beyond the city, or a handful of actors. We're asked to care about the sisters, but both are drawn from uninteresting archetypes – the driven, po-faced warrior and the innocent little sister – and neither display elements of personality beyond that. The game is peppered with little exchanges that should in theory tell us something about them, but they're rarely more than banal remarks – "I wish the killing could come to an end" – and, worse, they're repeated endlessly as you progress.

Chapters are bookended by cutscenes that serve to move the characters to new locations, but do very little to flesh them out in the process – likewise for the world and its history. There's being sparing with exposition and character development, and there's being plain lacking. You have to give us a reason to care eventually.

Sprinkling moments of melodrama atop a thin, simple plot

DARK SOULSTICE

Instead, story takes a back seat to action and atmosphere, in this apocalyptic, grimdark fantasy setting. It's a thickly ladled mood created by an overbearing soundscape that only lets up during the fast-paced battles, and a desaturated colour palette that makes it difficult to read the world at a glance. I had to squint at my screen multiple times to work out the layout of a scene, or to see the edge of a platform before I fell off the end of it. Upping the brightness helps a bit, but there's still not enough variation in the colour scheme – it's mainly shades of black and blue and green – for the environments to be legible immediately.

As in *Devil May Cry*, stages in *Soulstice* bounce between two phases. There's the exploration phase, where Briar traverses linear environments (with the occasional power-up or stash of currency in a dead-end path), and there are the chunky breakout battles, as creatures leap out of portals to have a go at you. Magical barriers create closed combat arenas, and when you've dispatched every enemy you're graded on your performance: how long you took, the combos you pulled off, how much damage you suffered, etc.

While the animation is a bit stiff, and the enemies not nearly as extravagant as in *DMC* or *Bayonetta*, combat in *Soulstice* is enjoyable, with rewarding feedback to the weapon thwacks and monsters that explode in glitter bombs of meat and currency. There's less emphasis on long-range combat (it's quite a while before you get a bow), and a great deal placed on your ghost companion, who can interrupt enemy attacks at the touch of a button.

As you're whacking and dodging as Briar, juggling creatures and trying to remember combos, often a button prompt will appear over enemies. Get the timing right and Lute will intervene, repelling an arrow or swatting a weapon back, depending on the context. It's a wee bit *Arkham Asylum*, letting you take on multiple enemies without having to worry about being attacked from all sides.

LUTE-'EM-UP

The timings are generous, but combat remains challenging, as Lute is unable to fend off everything at once. Battles grow in scale and complexity, introducing monsters that are invulnerable until you activate the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person action game in an apocalyptic fantasy setting

EXPECT TO PAY
£31

DEVELOPER
Reply Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Modus Games

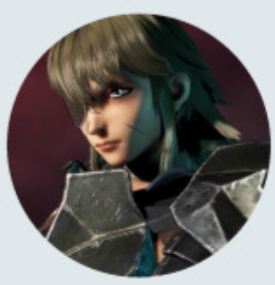
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
soulsticegame.com

SISTERS OF MERCY

Just the two of us



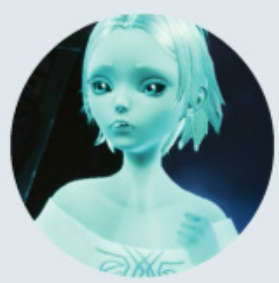
BRIAR

She's a Chimera
That means she's fused with her sister's soul.

She's also corrupted
So could turn into a monster at any moment.

She's part of a knightly order
It's sworn to defend the realm from void monsters.

But what happened?
Where are have all the other order members gone?



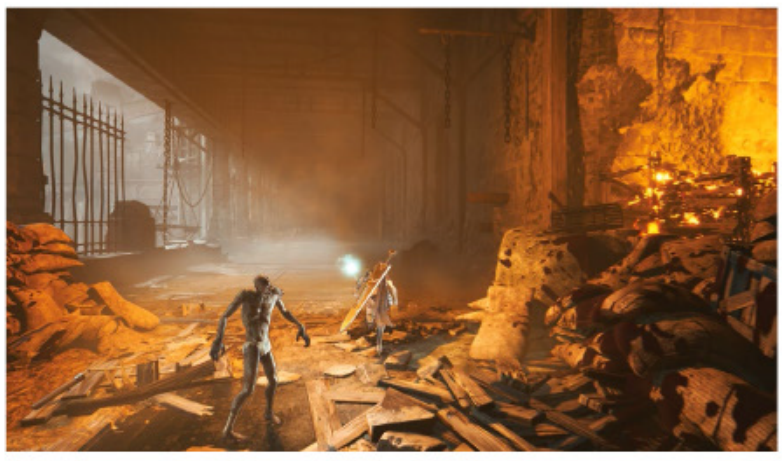
LUTE

She's a Chimera too
And, being a ghost, has kind of got the raw end of the deal.

She's dead
Monsters attacked their home, killing her and their parents.

She floats beside you
And automatically attacks with long-range magical shots.

She has magic fields
They let you damage tougher enemies and clear obstacles.



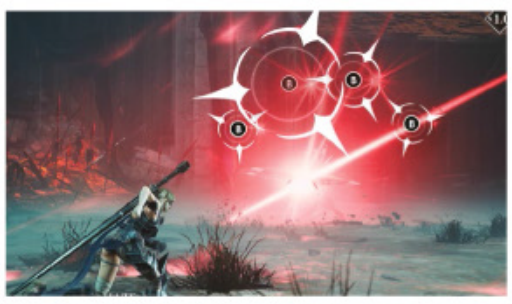
FAR LEFT: This big giant head is one of the few memorable enemies.

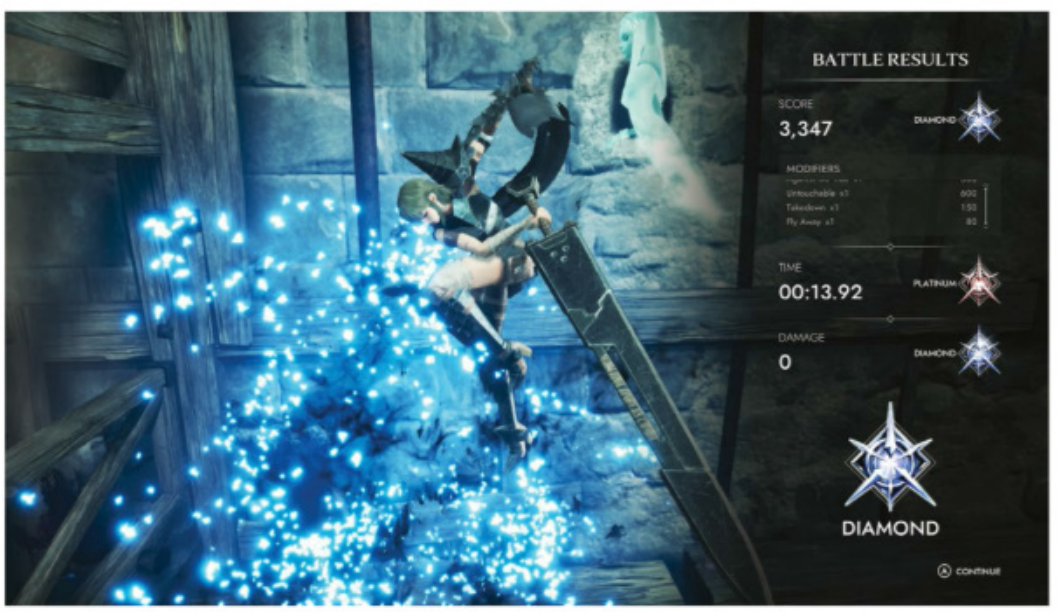
BELOW: Spend red crystals to upgrade Briar, and blue to enhance Lute.

Briar and Lute are a chimera: half human and half ghost.

RIGHT: Lute can deflect projectiles, if you hit the button in time.

BELOW: Each stage houses a portal to an optional challenge room.





appropriate energy field, knights with armour that has to be punched off first, and wraiths that possess creatures – and threaten to revive them. As such, it can be difficult to keep up with all of Lute's button prompts, and to remember that a frozen enemy will thaw out.

Button-mashing is *just* about doable, with the aid of consumable (and limited) health items that you can purchase or find secreted in the world, but at no point can you fully switch off during battle. Just when you've got the hang of energy fields – switching on the red so you can hurt red-tinged monsters, and the blue so you can pummel ghosts – suddenly you have to contend with mines as well. These flare up when you turn the red on, and *explode* if you leave it on too long. At times, combat in *Soulstice* just asks too much.

The world rings false nearly everywhere you go

Still, it feels good to survive a draining battle and see a platinum badge appear at the end – OK, a gold; fine, a silver; yes, a *bronze*. This lousy result grew more common for me as the systems piled up in *Soulstice*, from the super-powered Unity moves to the temporarily devastating Rapture State.

These advanced powers practically become essential later in the game, but it does a poor job of teaching them. The tutorial pop-ups lack detail, and the skill trees are full of confusing upgrades. For the longest time I had no idea how to pull off Unity moves.

Turns out they're actually finishers. You first have to build up the Unity meter (by mixing Briar and Lute's attacks, without getting hit), before executing certain special moves – the finishers will then follow on. But it's not clear at all, and I only figured it out by poring over the help menu and Lute's (four) skill trees.

As those are bafflingly rife with options, I'm grateful for Briar's veritable shrub of a tree, which is just a list of weapon combos and improvements. Sometimes less is more, you know? Bosh – I've just unlocked a new move for the whip.

CITY LIMITS

Outside of battle, this is a far simpler game. You follow the winding paths through the dim and colourless city, sometimes ducking down alleys to smash up crystals for currency, or to pick up the occasional upgrade nugget. Lute's multi-purpose energy fields also allow Briar to bypass traps, destroy crystal gates, and jump on ghostly platforms – none of which works as well as you'd hope.

It's primarily the fault of the camera, which is a throwback to the early days of *Devil May Cry*. When not in combat, there are fixed camera angles that really do frame the city in gorgeous ways but make it difficult to, ah, actually play the game.

Take the platforming, for example. There's a lot of platforming in *Soulstice*, and annoyingly never at consistent camera angles. Scenes are framed for style rather than utility much of the time, making it hard to judge the distance of adjacent platforms. I typically use the character's shadow as a guide when 3D games insist on platforming sections, but *Soulstice*'s world is so gloomy that isn't really an option.

This shaky sense of depth perception is a persistent issue, not just in the platforming, but sometimes during battle, or when you're smashing up crystals in mid-air. Am I beside them or not? It can be so hard to tell. Miss and you have to clamber back up for another go. Thankfully, battles (for the most part) grant you full control of the camera, zooming in and letting you swivel the damn thing round at your leisure. These moments of freedom are a balm – but then you win, unfortunately, and are clumsily thrown back to the primary, floating and fixed perspective.

CAMERA OBSCURA

I found this switching always disorientating, always frustrating, as if I was being forced to admire all the work that has gone into the environment. Sure, sometimes it's beautiful, as sunlight filters over a smouldering skyline, but I'd rather a consistent viewpoint that lets me progress without having to constantly find my bearings.

The world rings false nearly everywhere you go, with explorable spaces that don't line up with what you're seeing in front of you. You're forever butting up against invisible walls – oh, you can't go down *that* alley, or jump on *that* roof, or *that* platform, and only certain (glowing) crates can be destroyed. There's an art to hiding invisible walls, but they're completely in plain view in *Soulstice*, and it robs the game of any sense of immersion.

More than anything, what *Soulstice* feels like is a forgotten Xbox 360 action game: a relic from the halcyon days of AA gaming. Games like *Dark Sector* and *Dead to Rights: Retribution* – games that brought some fresh ideas and were decidedly *alright* at the time, but are maybe less so over a decade down the line.

Soulstice similarly has some good ideas – Lute does much to disturb the sacred formula of *Devil May Cry*-style games – but is similarly rough around the edges, with a yoyo-ing camera that constantly undermines the game. For me, the monotonous setting and level design ultimately drained my enthusiasm, but if you can look past its issues, this is a solid *Devil May Cry*-like, featuring chunky and challenging combat, and there aren't many of those to go around. ■

DOUBLE TROUBLE

When two become one – combat explained

1 FIELD OF SCREAMS
Lute can project red or blue fields that make specific enemies vulnerable. But leave them active too long and she'll vanish from the fight for a while.

2 UNBREAKABLE BOND
Fill this meter by executing combos without getting hit, to pull off Unity attacks or activate Rapture State, which makes the pair super-powered.

3 PLAYER BOO
In battle you control Briar, but Lute will chip in with long-range magical attacks, or by interrupting enemies that are about to attack you.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A meaty action game let down by a persistently rubbish camera, a dry story, and a world that's no fun to explore.

56

TEAM ORDERS

F1 MANAGER 2022 captures the drama and depth of being a pit boss

By Phil Iwaniuk

If last season in Formula One was all about the driving, this year it's about the management. Gone are the days of Lewis and Max fighting bitterly for every inch of tarmac, sending each other off into runoff areas and exchanging the least sincere handshakes in the pre-podium room this side of a Premier League dugout. Instead of a historic, headline-grabbing, on-track duel, 2022 has given us a season of baffling managerial incompetence. Bad news for anybody except Max Verstappen – and Frontier Developments.

Because when you watch the throttle pedal come loose on Leclerc's Ferrari while he's five laps from victory at Austria, or find yourself shouting at Mercedes' tire strategy in a safety car-laden Zandvoort, your natural inclination is to think you can do better. "Stay out, you fools!" You say to no one. "Let them blink first!"

Well, now's the chance to find out exactly how our brand of managerial incompetence stacks up against the rest of the grid. In its debut licensed F1 management sim, Frontier Developments conveys both the palm-drenching reactivity of a Sunday in the sport, and the frantic development race happening in between.

It's a format we've broadly seen before, in Playsport's 2017 *Motorsport Manager* release on PC and its mobile titles before that, but finished to a luxurious standard by Frontier, and bolstered by a 3D race engine that doesn't look a million miles off Codemasters' *F1 22*. Crucially, it holds the official Formula One licence, so you're managing real teams and drivers, and even scouting the talent pool down as far as real F2 and F3 prospects – for this sub-genre, that's new. It lends some *Football Manager*-style obsessive database trawling, and that's almost always a good thing.

It holds the F1 licence, so you're managing real teams

As team boss, you're in charge of everything from signing the drivers who'll sit in your car to the design and manufacture of that car's component parts. Pit crews jump into action on race day at your say-so, and even the amount of money sponsors pay you depends on the promises you make to them before each race weekend. Bizarrely, you're even involved in each car's mechanical setup. You wanton megalomaniac.

That makes for a nice cadence. Slow, therapeutic progression through email inboxes and front wing design menus, and then bursts of race day adrenaline as you're wrenched into a 3D engine showing the action on track. Something like *Football Manager*'s menus to match engine transitions, or *Civ*'s ponderous peacetime turning to terrifying wartime strategising. Your grand schemes are wrought in the wind tunnel, in driver contract negotiations and balance sheets. But it's the tarmac where you see them come to fruition. And it's that tick-tock of progress that has you bargaining with yourself in the dead of night: just one more race. I have to see where this new underfloor puts me on the grid.

Mercedes is the beneficiary of a new, totally unproven and unqualified team boss in my playthrough. Toto

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A licensed F1 management sim from the *Elite* devs

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Frontier Developments

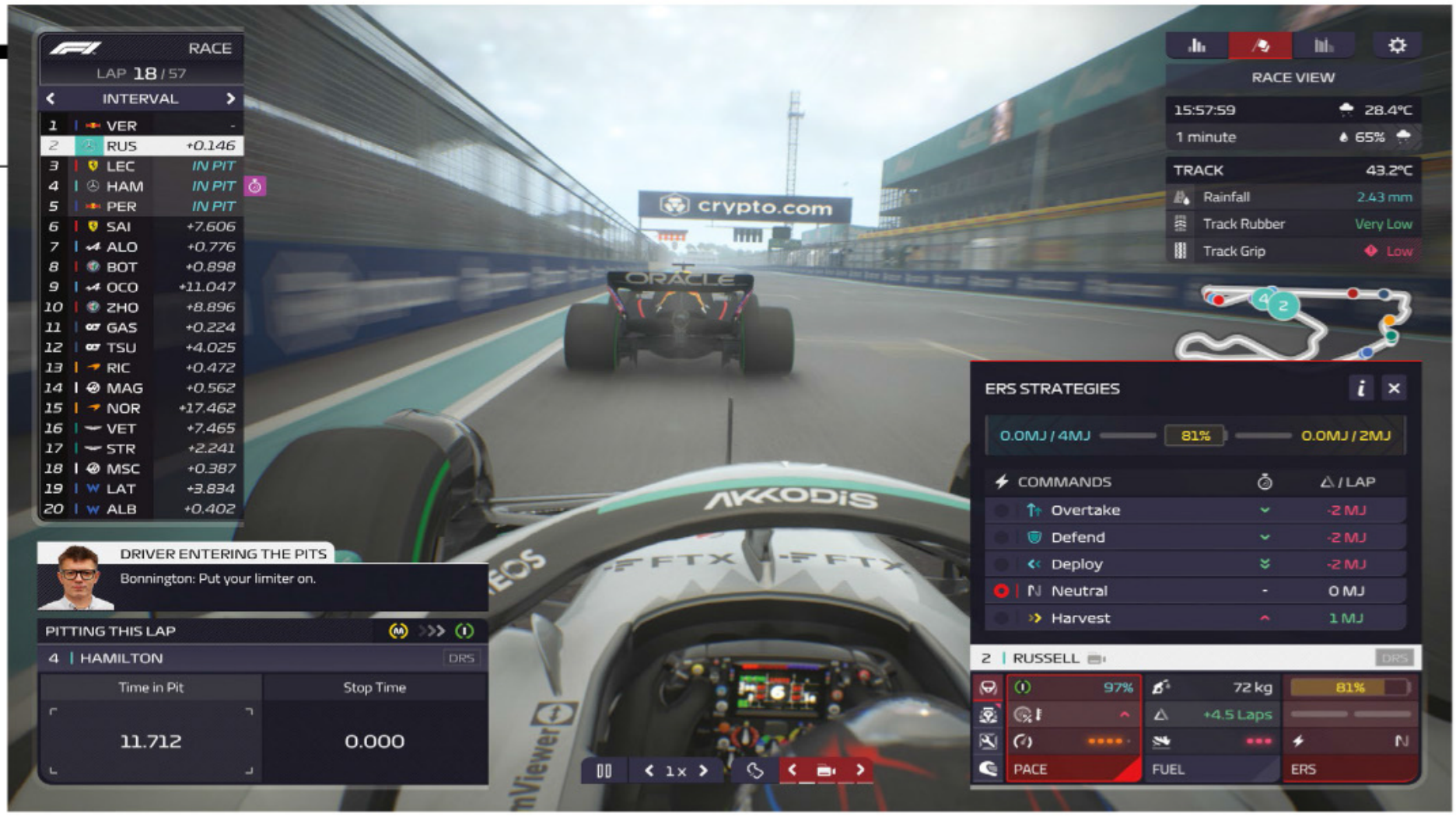
PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Core i7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3ftPjGB

RIGHT: Race day visuals don't match F1 22's eerie photorealism, but they're handsome.



TOP: Wanted: smarter drivers. Everyone's just a bit too reticent to overtake at launch.

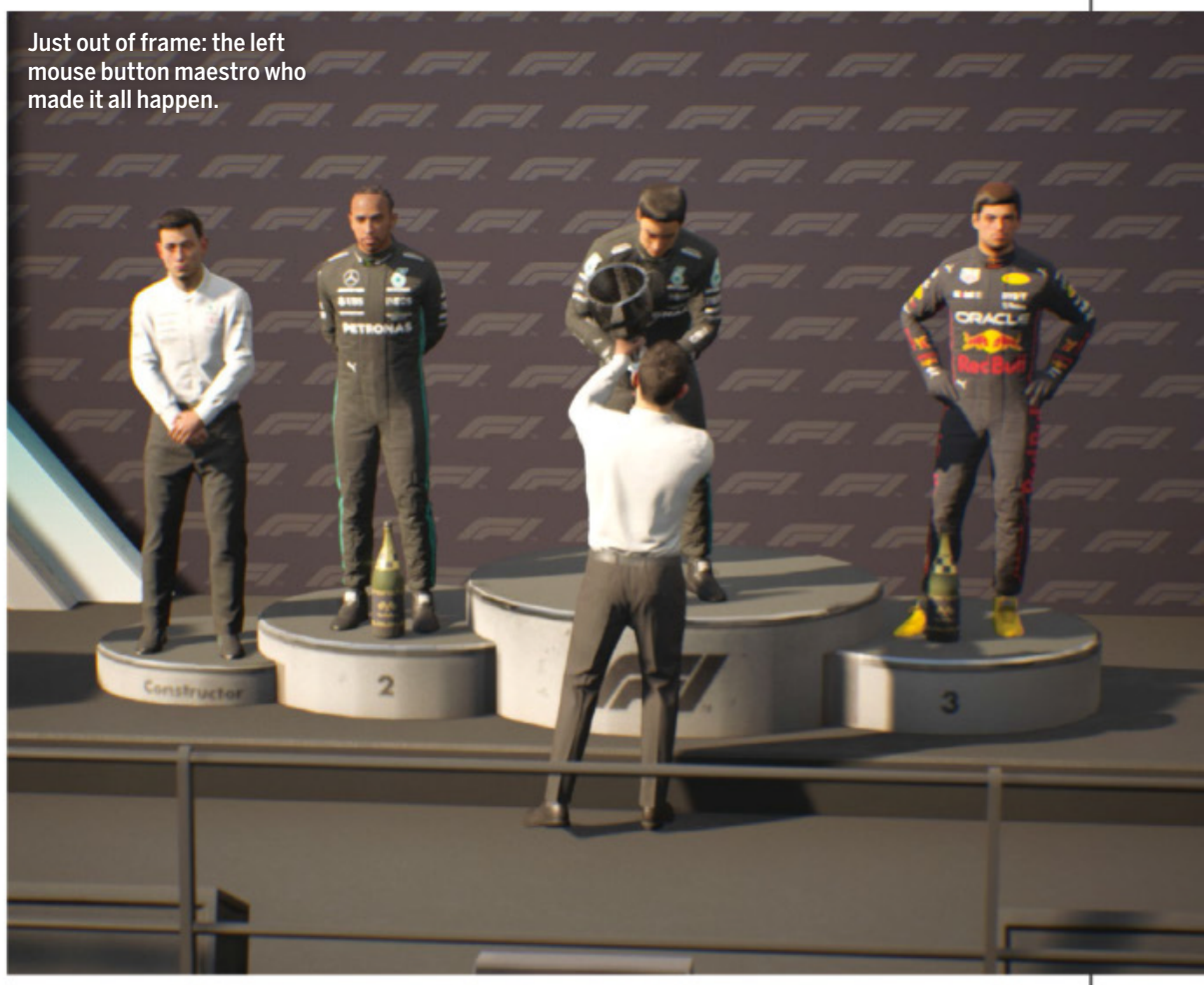
ABOVE: Take a bow, George. Earning drivers their first win is pretty tearjerking.

Wolff? Pfff. He's only got seven constructors' titles and a successful investment banking career to his name. Out on his arse. Phil Iwaniuk's in charge of the mouse clicks now, and he's turning this sinking ship around no matter what.

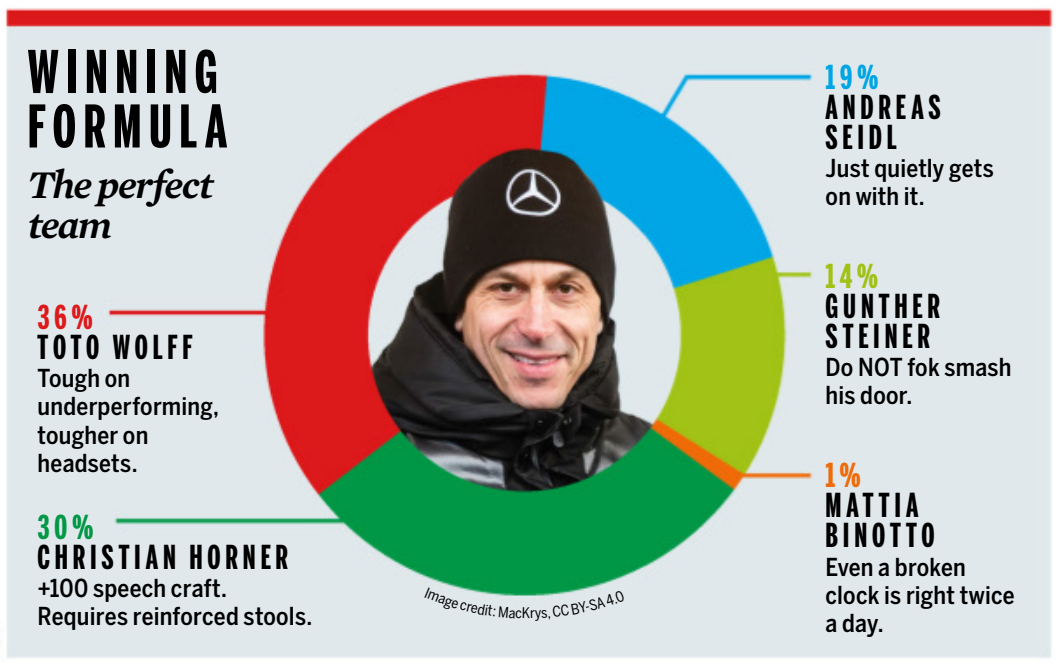
STICK TO THE FORMULA

I push through aero package updates across the whole car: chassis, front and rear wings, underfloor, sidepods, and new suspension designs. At great expense, I rush the design and manufacture of all these components, sacrificing bank balance and XP gain in order to fit new parts on the car and bridge the performance gap to Red Bull and Ferrari as soon as possible. After all, at this point if Lewis Hamilton is sitting in an F1 car and unable to win, that's on the car.

Such an aggressive upgrade strategy is a luxury afforded only to the top three teams. Further into the midfield, budgets are just too tight to throw unnecessary money away on rushed upgrades. And when the parts do come in, they're more likely to offer less performance gain because they're devised and built in lower quality facilities. Compounding that misery, sponsor payouts are much smaller too because the cars are buzzing around off camera most of the time, fighting for P16. So if you're wondering why Williams and Haas don't just make a better car in real life, play a bit of *F1 Manager 2022*.



Just out of frame: the left mouse button maestro who made it all happen.



Gamenamexxxx

TOP: Tire rubber is the most precious resource in the game. Motoring Tiberium.

ABOVE: Pre and post-race presentation is pretty slick, mirroring TV broadcasts.

The satisfaction of righting a perceived wrong in the real sport – a favourite driver not able to win, rampant organisational incompetence costing a team a 1-2 finish weekend after weekend – is only there if the simulation feels convincing enough. And that's something *F1 Manager* does really well, through the combination of a well-pitched difficulty level and smart presentation elements like real team radio voice clips. The bubble would burst if the teams and drivers felt like lines of code, or if changing the order of the grid happened too easily. They don't, and it doesn't.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Despite all my hurried aero upgrades for the Silver Arrows, it's more than half a season before we can even think about winning a race or taking pole on sheer pace. In the meantime, our only hopes are the weather and the safety cars.

It's not a passive experience though, overseeing a race. There's a lot of micromanagement to involve yourself in – drivers' pace, fuel burn level, ERS deployment, and pit strategy all lay in your hands. When you're managing all of these manually, corner to corner, it feels not unlike driving the car yourself. You're able to strong-arm your drivers through overtakes using these controls, but you can't brute-force a Williams onto the podium using

REDEEM TEAM

Four candidates for a great renovation project

WILLIAMS
Winner of seven driver championships, now F1's minnows. Toughest gig in the game.

MERCEDES
How the mighty have... slipped backwards. Slower than Red Bull until you mastermind a resurrection.

MCLAREN
The dominant force of the '80s, '90s, and very early '00s. Now stuck in the midfield and operating on smaller budgets.

ALFA ROMEO
Formerly Sauber. As a BMW factory team, they were race winners in the '00s. Make it happen again with the new badge.

judicious deployment of fuel and ERS alone. For the real head-turning results, you need a bit of luck from the aforementioned wet weather and some wild crashes.

And it's here, in the more unpredictable dimensions of the sport, where *F1 Manager 2022* reveals itself to be an inexperienced rookie rather than a wily old competitor. Crashes, safety cars, and sudden downpours should be the most spectacular and pivotal moments of an F1 manager's season, chances for decisive strategy calls to prevail over outright performance.

Alas, crashes aren't really depicted in any detail – cars just stop on track, or run off into the gravel trap. The visual spectacle just isn't here yet. And while wet weather rolls in and soaks the track at a believable rate, the AI is usually a bit too hive minded to produce any interesting scenarios as a result. The same goes for safety car and VSC scenarios. Not yet in my time with the game has a driver elected to make an extra unscheduled pit stop in order to get onto fresh soft compounds, as we saw with Red Bull in Zandvoort lately – or, rather more famously, with Red Bull in Abu Dhabi last year.

ROBOT RACE

You can make up a bit of ground in these scenarios, and there's definitely a sense of tension and adrenaline when they happen. But after a while it becomes clear that you're feeling pumped because of what you expect could happen, rather than what generally goes. There's very few instances of renegade or reactive pit stops, and that in turn doesn't force you into making many reactive decisions.

Where the AI really lets down this endeavour, though, is in the cockpit. It's hard to imagine that you're watching seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton in there when he's trailing Valtteri Bottas for 40 laps at Monaco, no matter what you tell him to do with the tires, fuel, and ERS. And it's hard to forgive the time you lose passing a back-marker who doesn't seem willing or able to get out of your way. George Russell lost ten seconds to Latifi once. There's no clever pit strategy to counteract that one.

Frontier can be proud of its well-judged foundational release

In the next instalment, which will surely come, AI behaviour should be a point of focus for Frontier. Right now it's responsible for breaking the illusion just that bit too often. But even with a grid full of dunces, *F1 Manager 2022* produces consistently thrilling races, and seems to deepen my investment in my Mercedes rebuild every hour I spend with it.

Lewis takes his maiden win of the season at Spa, quite late, and George Russell got the first top step of his career in a bizarrely rainy Miami race. But two seasons in and over $50m spent on upgrades, Red Bull still has the outright pace advantage. That's exactly how I'd want it, too. You don't want to score the science victory in *Civ* before you hit the classical era.

Frontier can be proud of its well-judged foundational release in what will certainly become a long-running series. In a perfect world, we'd see cars shatter into carbon fibre splinters when they crashed, and we'd recognise the Verstappens and Ricciardos by their driving styles, not just their liveries. As it is, the fundamentals are all in place, ready to build on.

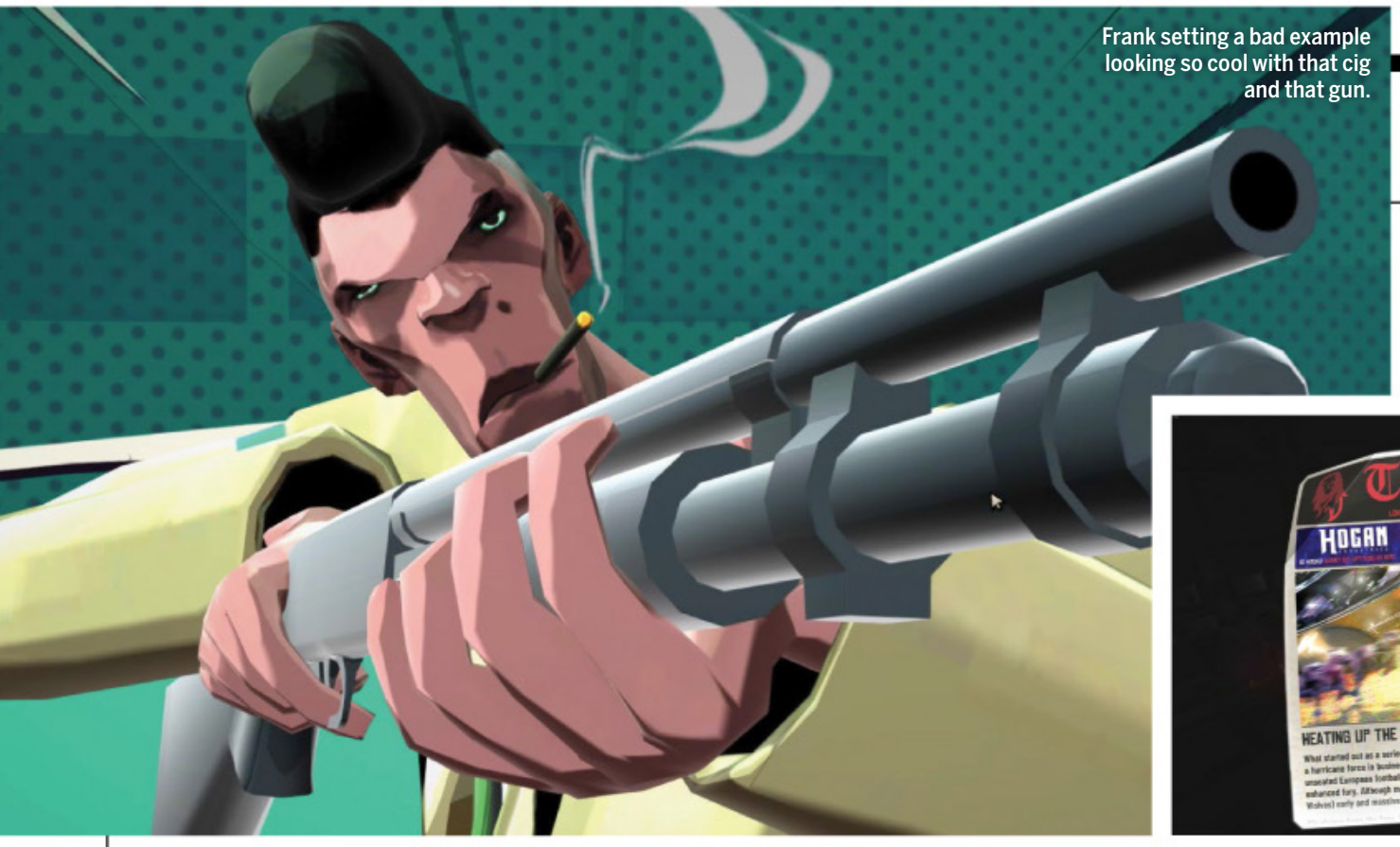
A foundation, ironically, that's been around for a few years already. This game owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to Playsport Games' 2017 *Motorsport Manager*, which formed a comprehensive blueprint for how modern racing management sims should play. A blueprint that Frontier has observed almost to the millimetre, right down to the way you refine car setups through free practice sessions. The licence and the high-detail race visuals do enough to make this new game stand alone, though, and *F1 Manager 2022* wields its official licence in all the right areas, building an ecosystem that evolves season to season, and keeps you chasing that perfect car for even longer than Toto has. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Tense and involving, if just slightly lacking smarts and spectacle. A firm foundation to build a series on.

79

ABOVE: Sir Lewis, back on the podium. It took a long of front wing designs to get here.

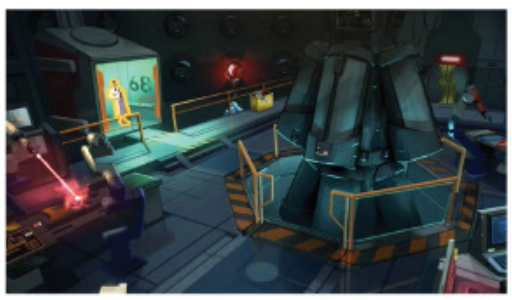


Frank setting a bad example looking so cool with that cig and that gun.

RIGHT: High quality art helps make up for bland settings like this morgue.

FAR RIGHT: This memorable set piece really stuck out to me.

BELOW: It's no Seventh Heaven, but it'll do.



SUNDAY FUNDAY

SUNDAY GOLD is a point-and-click adventure that penalises clicking on everything

By Ted Litchfield

Sunday Gold almost feels like a reshuffle of _Final Fantasy VII_. You've got the corporate overlord and his secret labs gutting an over-industrialised city, the rag-tag freedom fighters – complete with disaffected loner and bruiser lady with a heart of gold – and a secret base under a dive bar to return to. It's red meat, classic videogame stuff. The game's initial trailers drew me in with its arresting neo-'70s sci-fi setting, but the most refreshing thing about _Sunday Gold_ is its combo of old school JRPG gameplay with point-and-click adventuring.

The trend in newer RPGs (I'm thinking *Pillars of Eternity*, *Divinity 2*) is to bring you back to full health in-between fights, letting players focus on the tactical minutia of each battle. *Sunday Gold* instead tasks you with treating each of its three chapter-heists as a long war of attrition, managing party members' health, stress, action points, and consumables, negotiating Sierra-style exploration and item gathering puzzles as well as dust-ups with corporate security without any real breaks.

Sunday Gold's addition of scarcity and stress to classic adventure gameplay is refreshing in the current field. It's innovative in a similar vein to fellow 2022 adventure/RPG, *Citizen Sleeper*, which tasked you with making the most of daily dice rolls to live your best life on a space station. These two games present an alternate path to the way PC Gamer's perennial favourite, *Disco Elysium*, blended the genres of RPG and adventure. In contrast to *Disco Elysium*'s embrace of build crafting and skill checks, *Sunday Gold* and *Citizen Sleeper* are all about thinking on your feet and managing those scarce resources effectively.

THOSE WHO FIGHT

There's a set piece about two thirds through that feels like a culmination of that kind of tight, harried puzzle solving. Your party gets trapped in a classic Star Wars trash compactor situation necessitating that you find four keys hidden in the room. You get a shared pool of around 25 points to spend before the tap goes off, wiping your team, but there's more than that many points worth of leads to investigate. You've got the keys themselves, perched atop high shelves or locked behind an electrified door. The trap also contains valuable optional loot like a shotgun for Frank, your DPSer. There's also, however, a smattering of junk options like shoulder checking the door or even shooting at it. On my first attempt I threw everything at it and failed. Chastened, I reloaded and really thought my way through this puzzle.

All about thinking on your feet and managing resources

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A curious mix of JRPG and point-and-click adventure in a very *Deathloop*-esque '70s near future

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC

DEVELOPER
BKOM

PUBLISHER
Team 17

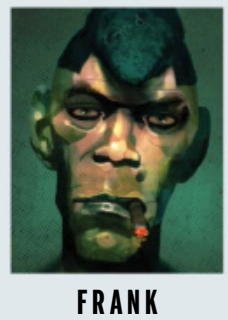
REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12600K, Nvidia RTX 3070, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3ByvJBu

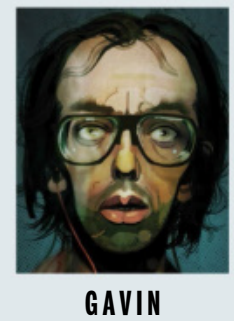
CRIME CREW

What they lack in wits they make up in personality



FRANK
An ex-con only in it for the money, Frank uses rifles and knives to max out single target DPS.

SALLY
This bruiser is also an animal rights activist with a heart of gold. Invaluable utility as a healer.



GAVIN
Your average PC Gamer reader. This hacker is a little fragile, but he also has pipe bombs!

Sunday Gold does have a bit of that old Sierra moon logic for some of its puzzles, unfortunately. There's that adventure game staple of machinery having a missing valve that you have to collect from elsewhere before screwing it in to use it for a valve-y purpose – seriously, who keeps these things anywhere other than where they screw in? It's not always signposted well when a puzzle is limited to one room and when you might have to backtrack to gather necessary components, leaving a few set pieces that sent me clicking around a series of rooms until something, well, clicked.

Sunday Gold's expressive, impressionistic character design and '70s 'conversation pit future' are what really drew me to it initially, and I remain taken with the aesthetic. The style is somewhat wasted on the game's first two acts, though, a corporate office building and a catalogue-direct Umbrella corp secret lab. Your dive bar home base and the final act's Knives Out novelty mansion leverage the setting better, but I think there was a lot of juice left in that orange. Additionally, while the setting and broad strokes of the characters spoke to me, the moment to moment dialogue did not – everybody here communicates in either bland bants or straight information dumps.

Storytelling aside, *Sunday Gold* is a successful proof-of-concept, an experiment with effectively taping two genres together end over end that manages to do one great and the other good enough. It doesn't have the emotional or philosophical heft of a *Citizen Sleeper* or a *Disco Elysium*, but who needs that when you have tactical, menu-based combat? ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Sunday Gold*'s genre mashup experiment leaves me ready to forgive its very real shortcomings.**

81

IRONBORNE

STEELRISING mixes Paris with Yharnam

By Ian Evenden

Recently, in this very publication, the call went out for the death of the *Souls*-like, and yes, maybe that particular seam is looking a bit mined out right now. Dreary *Dark Souls* has a spunky cousin, however, that was never released on PC (though rumours persist), by the name of *Bloodborne*. It's fast, it's aggressive, it features guns and transforming weapons, and it's a major influence on *Steelrising*.

You step into the porcelain skin of Aegis, a gynoid automaton with a steady hand for on-fleek eye makeup and whose buckled court shoes have an outrageous high heel. She is bodyguard to Marie Antoinette, the Austrian-born queen of France and apocryphal milkmaid-fetishist with strong views on what the poor should consume. Allegedly. Her Majesty and a friend are trapped inside the palace of Saint Cloud outside Paris just as the rabble are revolting, and fear the great unwashed might not be the only thing attempting to feel the cool breeze of emancipation, as the king's new robotic security forces have slaughtered all the previous guards and now patrol the palace grounds, letting nobody in or out.

Marie Antoinette, naturellement, wants to know what's going on, but rather than sneaking out herself and playing *Metal Gear Solid: Cake Eater* in her gigantic dress, she dispatches Aegis to Paris to act as her agent there. Our robotic hero then chops and blasts her way through the mechanical hordes, collecting resources (Essence), upgrades, and new weapons along the way.

PHYRE BRIGADE

Developer Spiders is appropriately French, but has previous form emulating BioWare rather than FromSoftware. Its best-known game may be *Greedfall*, but the studio also produced 2016 ARPG *The Technomancer*, which saw you battling robots on Mars. It makes its games using Silk, a modified version of Sony's PhyreEngine, evidence of which appeared during occasional crashes when the game got confused while having the Steam screenshot button hammered during a fight. That screenshot button proved to be a bit of a problem, repeatedly causing pauses and exits to the desktop when deployed, though the game was also capable of doing this for other reasons, such as coming to the end of a cutscene. Hopefully this was just an unfortunate quirk of the review build, as it's a game that deserves to have plenty of luxurious screenshots in the wild.

That so much of the game takes place in the light is to its credit

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An ARPG in the *Bloodborne* mould

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Spiders

PUBLISHER
Nacon

REVIEWED ON
Threadripper 2950X, 64GB RAM, RTX 3080 10GB

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
steelrising.com

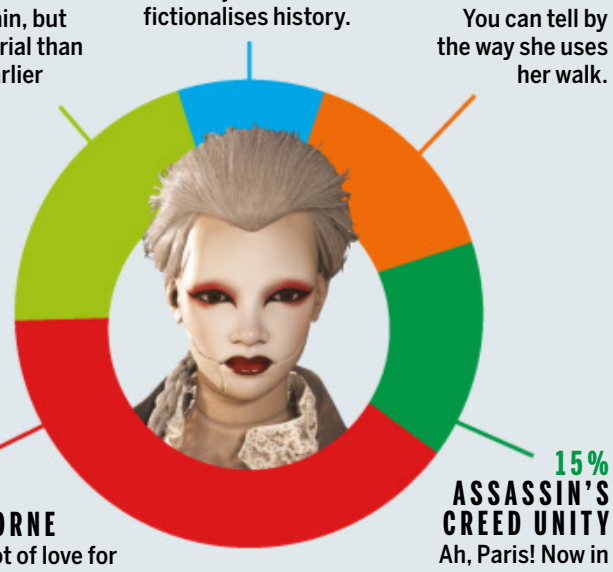
The game supports ray-tracing, and at 4K resolution and Ultra settings requires slightly more VRAM than a 10GB graphics card can provide. Still, turning it down a bit is little hardship, as it's a very attractive game – as long as you're capable of appreciating the aesthetic quality of mass graves of villagers and piles of dead pigs. Elsewhere, woodlands abound with sunbeams filtering through the trees, wet roads shine, only the Seine itself is disappointing, a turgid green trench devoid of much character. That so much of the game takes place in the light is to its credit, the traditional setting of the screen brightness so you can just make out a symbol at the game's launch making the heart sink in anticipation of another bug hunt through locations as black as Batman's underpants.

DANCE PARTY

Aegis herself looks like a doll but moves like a dancer, preferring long tailcoats that swish behind her. She has a long-limbed run not unlike that of Dante in *Devil May Cry*, but it feels more fitting to tilt the thumbstick less far and permit her to use her purposeful walk, with the added benefit of allowing you to take in the scenery at a more sedate pace. It feels odd these days not to exist in a world in which every object is imbued with physics properties, and can be kicked across the map. Not here – carts of lettuces and trays of apples remain frozen in place as you pass, the sole animation coming from Aegis and her enemies. Her feet make no impression in the puddles she runs through, gates left temptingly ajar are locked in place, ladders can't be climbed, and it's entirely possible to become stuck behind chairs apparently much too heavy to push out of your way. Only the occasional flapping flag, swinging lantern, or circling bird lets you know this isn't pre-rendered, and barrels can be smashed in search of goodies.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

The games Spiders has been playing



Marie Antoinette is most dreadfully concerned.

FAR LEFT: More people would go to church if there were robots there.

BELOW: The robots have left Paris dreadfully untidy.

A new hat, and it's an excellent one.

FAR RIGHT: ...and this is where I keep my collection of faces.

RIGHT: I may have found the pot of gold.

Unless they're covered in a cloth, which makes them indestructible.

There's also a slight ambiguity over how high something must be before Aegis can no longer jump over it, and much time will be spent admiring her graceful leap, her legs tucked up underneath her and her hand put out for balance, as you fruitlessly bounce about by the side of a wall that's surely low enough. Later she acquires a grappling hook, but it can only be used on particular spots in the world.

Weapons retract into her forearms no matter how huge they are

Many of her best moves pass so quickly in the blur of combat that they can be hard to spot, but the spread of her fingers as a blow connects, her halberd lunge that brings her body almost horizontal, supported on only one leg, and the way both her feet sometimes leave the ground even though you've been nowhere near the jump button mean there's a fluid beauty to this combat system to match the static world around it. Weapons retract into her forearms no matter how huge they are, meaning she's not encumbered as she moves and we're spared the sight of a blade clipping into her back.

One little detail that mars proceedings is the flat gouts of what must be oil that sometimes spray from your robotic foes as you batter them into the ground. A health bar sits over each one's head once it's aware of you, but the bots themselves don't appear to take any visible damage from your strikes. Likewise the environments: weapons capable of rending metal bodies are unable to make any impression on boards.

CLASS ACTION

At the very beginning you choose from one of four classes for your Aegis. Bodyguard (tank) soldier (damage dealer), dancer (agility specialist), or alchemist (user of potions). That, along with a limited character creator that allows a choice of skin tone, face shape and wig, is all you get until you begin collecting new costumes (armour) and weapons as you fight through Paris. That the costume-change screen is called the 'Boutique' tells you perhaps all you need to know.

She's a curious avatar to inhabit, her doll-like perfection apparently so intrinsic to the game that the character creator goes to great pains not to let you stray too far from it, yet must exist because it's what players expect. *Bloodborne*, similarly, has a vestigial character creator largely concerned with your character's origin and far removed from the pot-on-head shenanigans of *Elden Ring*. It's perhaps odd that a character so obviously constructed should be given any choice over what she looks like, given that the role she plays will be the same whatever choice is made.

Enemy designs are a mixed bunch, with tall, imperious robot swordsmen giving way to grenade-launching bots, robotic dogs, metal snake/mosquito nightmares, and of course bosses and sub-bosses that are much larger than anything else and make you wonder just what kind of advanced manufacturing processes they had in revolutionary France. One type is particularly comical, a tall humanoid with a bowl for a head and what appear to be incense censers hanging from its arms that it uses to launch spinning attacks and smashes together to knock you back. Your only interaction is through violence, though occasionally you'll be able to help out invisible survivors of the massacre hiding in buildings, happy to exchange the bag of grenades they hadn't used for a drink of water.

ASSIST ME

Combat is a matter of three moves – light, heavy, and special, the last of which differs depending on the weapon you have selected. There are grenades to throw, a lock-on, and stealth attacks should you manage to come up behind an enemy. And while Soulsborne games are notorious for their firm but fair difficulty level, Spiders has opened its heart to the player who just wants to experience the story with Assist Mode. Enable it from the menu, and damage taken from enemies as well as speed of regeneration afterward can be tailored to your preference. Without this it can be a tricky game, as while three heavy blows are enough to down an average foe, actually getting them to land requires timing and patience, circling and dodging while relying on the lock-on to keep you facing in the right direction. Pile on the attacks and you'll stagger the enemy, but lose enough of your stamina gauge in the process and you'll need to activate your cooling systems with a QTE. Do this too much and you'll freeze.

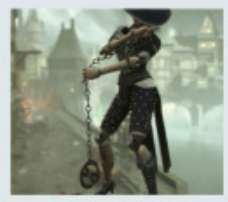
Checkpointing is handled particularly elegantly, with Vestals – statues you can activate to transform into a chair you sit in, Westworld-style arms picking at your body as they make repairs and bestow upgrades – dotted about the world, often guarded. In the chair you can infuse Modules into your spine, unlocking abilities, and spend the Essence (and other things) you've collected to upgrade stats or weapons. Once you unlock the horseless carriage (for fast travel) this acts as a Vestal too.

Derivative as it is, there's something compelling about *Steelrising*. It draws a world full of imagination, levels are broken up regularly with new revelations to keep you pushing on, and it never unfairly swamps you with enemies. We may have seen it all before, but never quite like this. ■

METAL MASHING MUSIC

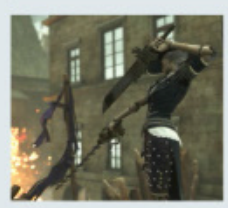
A few of our favourite ways to smash bots

FREEZY GUN
Fire from a distance to freeze a bot in place. Its special is a useful shield.

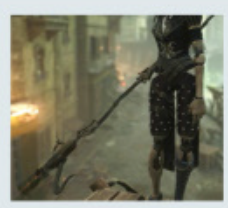


FIERY CHAIN
A whirling dance of red-hot death to make bots fear for their oil.

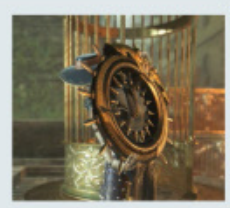
LIGHTNING CLAWS
Like *Soulcalibur*, there are ornate fan weapons too.



DOUBLE CHOPPER
This has a *Soulcalibur* vibe too, the light and heavy blades mixing it up.



BOOMSTICK
A favourite. Great range and damage, and converts into a gun too.



THEWHEEL
Has to be seen to be believed. Tricky to master, but the results are worth it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Hack and slash at robots in *Steelrising*, and look damned good while doing it. Not quite on par with *Elden Ring* though.

75

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

It's a pleasingly vertical island. The absence of fall damage makes it easy to descend.

BEACH-COMBING

Take a mini-break with 3D platformer BEACH ISLAND DELUXE

I've not played a *Mario* game in ages, so *Beach Island Deluxe* was a welcome blast of fresh coastal air. Its bright, colourful environment, non-linear level design, and even the move set of its protagonist are all reminiscent of the plumber's 3D adventures. Spoiler: it isn't as good, of course, but it does capture some of the Nintendo magic, albeit with a protagonist from the Cool Spot school of mascot design.

In *Beach Island Deluxe* you play as a bin (or, perhaps, a bin-shaped robot), wearing *Sonic* sneakers, sunglasses, and a backwards cap. It's probably a pastiche of '90s mascot design, but you still have to stare at a preposterous bin for the whole game, and it gets this jaunt off to a decidedly rocky start.

Thankfully, once you've hopped over the tutorial wall and found your way onto the island proper, you'll be too busy leaping about the place to care. In true 3D *Mario* style, you're free to head in any number of directions, stumbling onto bite-size platforming courses that will inevitably lead you to a collectible star. Bin Thing handles pretty well – slightly stiffer than Mario and with a run that's a bit too slippery – but it still feels satisfying to bound your way across a gauntlet of moving, collapsing, or distant platforms, until you reach the safety of the next checkpoint flag.

Blocky ruins and metal towers buzzing with clockwork hazards

This is the platforming stage as a wind-up machine: blocky ruins and metal towers buzzing with clockwork hazards and moving platforms, which you have to clear to collect the stars that will open the exit. The best thing is climbing a peak and watching the cogs whir around you – the bomb traps halfway down the tower, and the giant fans puffing away – then leaping off and landing on the ground with nary a scratch. Ooh, I haven't gone *there* yet – I wonder if there's a star twinkling away down there. So off you trot to bag another object.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Mario*-esque platformer set on a low poly 3D tropical island

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Kevin Ethridge Games

PUBLISHER
DigiPen Institute of Technology

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/BeachIsland

STAR TURN

There's a garish, overwhelming charm to the art style, which is chasing the PS1 rather than the N64 aesthetic. It could be more legible, and less noisy, but it suggests the '90s in a more natural way than the plucked-from-a-waste-basket style of the protagonist. Less welcome is the repetitive tune that accompanies the game, as its frenetic rock feels at odds with the more laid-back vibes.

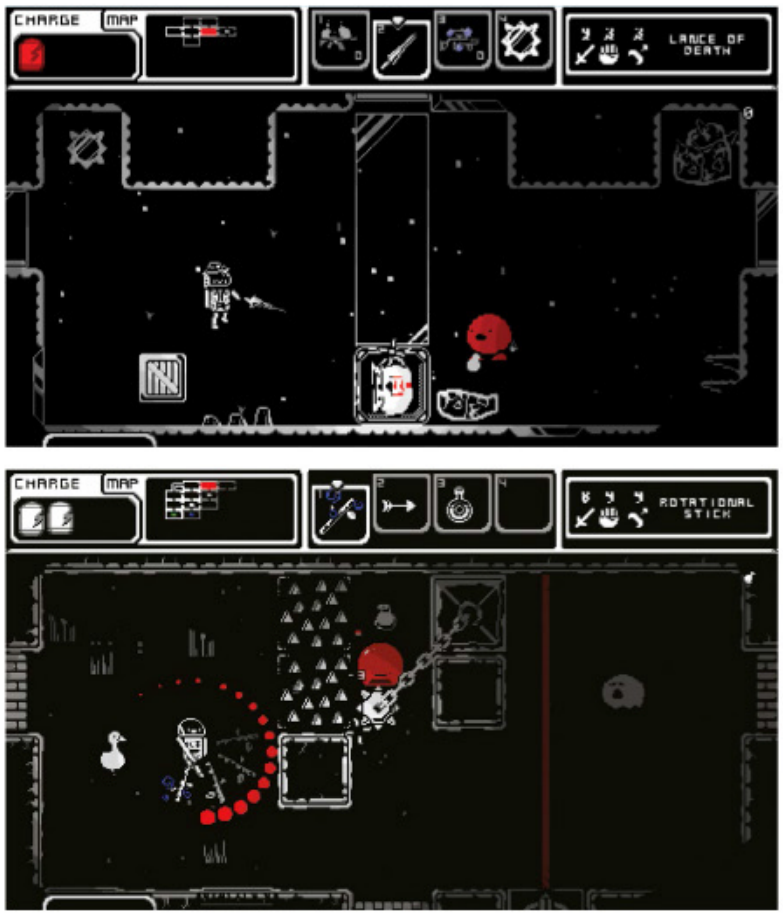
Getting everything won't take long, and you only need seven stars to open the exit portal, which feels a little pointless as the only ending is a brief thank you. At the risk of adding too many ingredients, I feel the game could do with a little *more*, like another collectible to really make the most of the environment. This is a weekend getaway rather than a fortnight's holiday: very much appreciated, but not quite enough to scratch that platforming itch. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Nintendo needn't worry, but this is a good 3D platformer whose bite-size nature leaves me wanting more.

72

BELOW: It looks oddly like a platformer, but this is a top-down game.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Prox	bit.ly/Dynacore

CORE BLIMEY?

Room for one more roguelite? Here's DYNACORE

With their fly-swat default attack, I was put off the hero of *Dynacore* pretty much immediately. It's a *Binding of Isaac*-style roguelite, but one where you can't reliably get hold of a long-range weapon. For the early part of most runs, I had to make do with the miserable default punch.

It's miserable because it forces you to close in on enemies, in cramped corridors that are also full of traps. There are traps *everywhere*, spinning round like the hands of a clock or popping out of walls to scoop chunks of your health. Compounding this is the art style, whose monochrome nature makes it hard to read the level, and the giant, obscuring cursor that forgets it's supposed to be a crosshair.

I died a lot in *Dynacore*, but it's worth persisting, because in other ways it's a slickly enjoyable roguelite.

It's got the *Binding* basics down pat: the procedural grid of *Zelda* rooms filled with enemies and occasional pick-ups, and the challenging bosses that will unlock the next level. It feels good to control, with satisfying damage feedback and a *hell* of a lot of screen shake.

Gathering gear is more frustrating than in *Isaac* or *Enter the Gungeon*, as I cluttered up my inventory with single-use novelty weapons or guns that relied on ammo, which is hard to come by. It was always deflating to reach a boss while holding a cool new gun, only to run out of ammo and be left with that meagre punch.

If it mainly serves to show just how accomplished *Isaac* and *Gungeon* are by comparison, *Dynacore* is still a slick roguelite that can be enjoyable – if you're lucky during a run. ■

57

MENTAL BLOCKS

Solving emotional puzzles in SOMETIMES

How to convey the inside of a mind: the sea of emotions roiling throughout the day. One way, as evidenced in *Sometimes*, is to make use of *Tetris* pieces, which you must place on a compact puzzle grid. You're trying to recreate a mental state: not just happy or sad, but somewhere messily in-between.

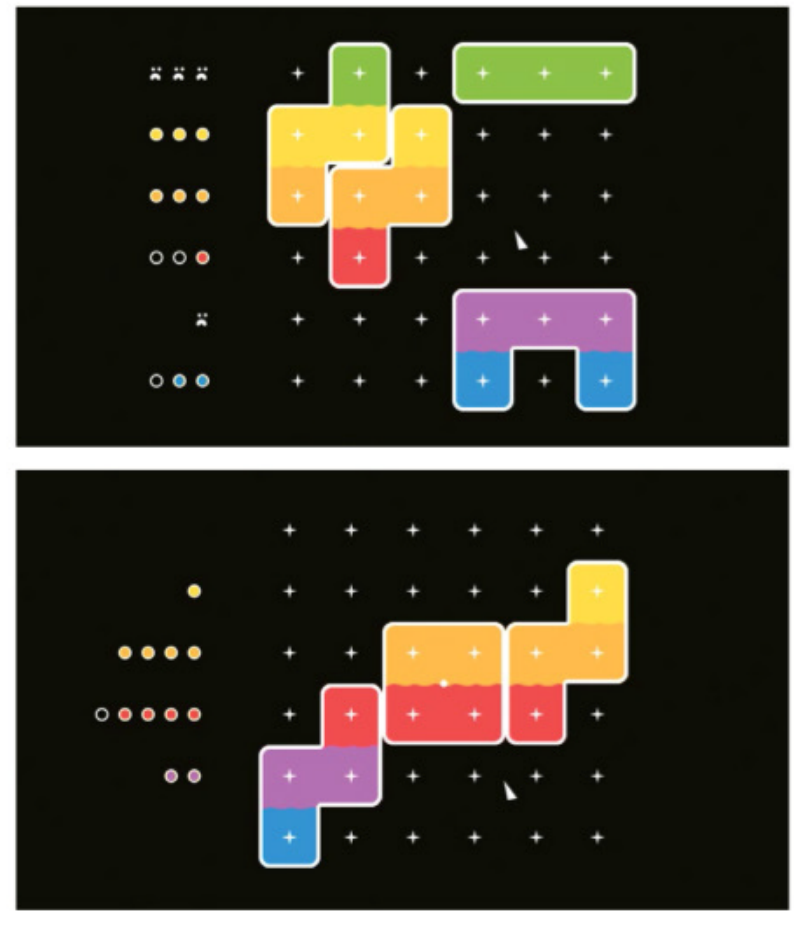
It's an unusual puzzle game. I've not played anything quite like it. In each stage you have to place the pieces so that the right number of blocks are present on each line, something you achieve by dragging and rotating each blocky shape. When a shape is at the top of the grid, it will turn green or yellow, and when it's dragged way down to the bottom it will turn a maudlin shade of purple or blue.

So you drag, you rotate, you experiment until you find a solution. The concept is cleverly expanded when blocking squares are introduced – these cancel out one of the blocks on the same line. The game never gets more complex than that, but for me it finds a sweet spot in terms of difficulty. I've never been great at all those devious puzzle games, so a moderately challenging experience is always welcome.

It's a successful marrying of mechanics and theme, but the brief lines of story are too vague to really add anything. But, rather than some long epic that will give my brain an exhaustive workout, my favourite puzzlers are the ones like *Sometimes*: cool ideas, explored in a little depth, in games that seem to exist just for the joy of making. It reminds me that there are always fresh ideas floating round in the ether – they're just waiting to be found. ■

73

BELOW: Place too many blocks, and the pips turn into unhappy faces.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Ludipe	bit.ly/3elLvXa

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

"Prison should be punishment! Get rid of the PlayStation 360s and replace them with flamethrowers."

BARRY ISLAND

RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS 2 is a family affair

It should be impossible to like Moira Burton. At times, she feels she was brainstormed by a committee of 50-year-old men at Capcom. "She's an ingénue. But she's foul-mouthed! Also she wears hot pants." However, by design or more likely by accident, she's adorable. More impressively, she manages to feel like a real person who grew up in a world of monstrous spiders, haunted mansion,s and poorly-timed sandwich quips.

Enjoying Moira's company would be harder if the AI in *Revelations 2* wasn't up to snuff. Thankfully, it's mostly brilliant. This is a huge part of what, at times, feels like it could have been the first steps on a different path for the series. In the end, the games ditched the dual characters and replaced them with gruelling, first-person terror. But there's something about *Revelations 2* that's more endearing and unsettling than the fifth and sixth *Resident Evil* games.

PASSING THE TORCH

It helps that one member of your team is passive without being a pacifist. Moira hates guns; Natalia is just a kid (albeit one who's lethal with a brick). It's a dynamic that mostly works, even if at times it does feel like you're a parent with the sort of terminally clumsy child who can only be trusted with a torch (and ideally not an especially bright one). Moira in particular adds some much needed life to the sections with Claire, who doesn't feel so much like a character here as a coat hanger for an amazing jacket (and, sadly, the jacket is missing). It's also wonderful getting to play as Barry, who's grown from being a one-man meme delivery system into a gritty reboot of Ned Flanders: a man whose disdain for cuss words is surpassed only by his love for his daughter and proficiency with a Colt Python.

Moira adds some much needed life to the sections with Claire

There are other elements here that make *Revelations 2* feel like a different beast. Natalie can sense enemies, making it easier for Barry to sneak up on them and carry out one-shot stealth kills. And little touches, such as using Moira's torch to find items, mean that it's worth swapping regularly if you want to hoover up all the collectibles. And you will, because this is still a *Resident Evil* game. Ammo never seems as scarce as in the earlier games, but nor is it so plentiful that you can happily plug away at whatever abominations it sends lolloping your way. Separating the two characters but giving them someone to talk to is a deft way of making everything that happens matter. While some of the game's gimmicks fall flat, the constant pull of two estranged family members trying to survive long enough to see each other is motivation enough, even if it's just so you can hear Barry tell Moira off for swearing. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Clive Barker's Trine: The Bloodening

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3LL3ltJ

PC GAMER VERDICT

Not as flashy as a main series entry, but it's great getting to spend time with the extended *Resident Evil* cast.

72

BELOW: The sort of survival horror door that screams 'you're not ready for me yet'

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£5	Darkworks, Spiral House	THQ Nordic

LOVECRAFT WORK

Shine a light in ALONE IN THE DARK: THE NEW NIGHTMARE

***The New Nightmare* might have the most 2001 character descriptions in any game. Warlock-ass-looking private eye Edward Carnby's distinguishing feature is that he "owns a double-barrelled gun".**

It's misleading, because *The New Nightmare* isn't as stupid as this suggests. It has all the trappings of an early noughties horror game: tank controls, grim men with revenge on their minds, women who inexplicably lose their coats. But there's rather a nice Lovecraftian story here, full of stone circles, ancient rituals, and sinister, conniving families. Shadow Island might be a shitty name for a location, but visually it holds up surprisingly well: a place of twisted statues and mysterious observatories that offers the same kind of pleasurable chills as the best Hammer horror films. In fact, the story was sufficiently interesting to provide loose inspiration for the wretched Alone in the Dark film.

Much was made at the time of the game's lighting effects, and it still feels cool that you can shine your torch around the cobwebbed environments. The sound design has aged well too, like the noise stilton would make if you could hear it. The unsettling bed of weird noises and suspicious murmurs mean that *The New Nightmare* manages to remain unsettling, even if the archaic lumpiness of it all takes the edge off. Your bonus audio fact is that the music is provided by former Police drummer Stuart Copeland, which might be useful pub quiz ammo in the unlikely event you meet anyone else with any recollection of this pleasantly ordinary game.

71

RUVIK'S CUBE

Bludgeoning subtlety to mince in THE EVIL WITHIN

Rounding off our list of torchlight-adjacent titles we have *The Evil Within*: a game that makes most other survival horror titles look like they were directed by François Truffaut. Shinji Mikami's return to horror is so determined to shock and appal you that it almost becomes comical.

This is a game where one thing is never enough. The haunted asylum can't just have a single spooky wheelchair creaking across the frame. It has to have 50, which makes it look more like a mobility aid wholesaler rather than something from a horror game. Likewise with The Keeper, The Evil Within's hulking, hammer-swinging mascot. It's somehow not enough that his head is literally a safe filled with pulsating meat.. But wrapping the safe in barbed wire just makes it look like The Keeper is accessorising. Instead of being scared, I'm imagining him sitting down at his dressing table, trying to work out which barbed wire will match his tenderising hammer.

The glorious excess continues throughout the entire game. Nothing here is half-assed. Car parks erupt, cities tumble in on themselves, reality itself folds like frightening origami. Do I have any idea what's actually going on? Absolutely not. That would be like trying to read a nailbomb. And it's very rarely scary or especially tense, just loud and disgusting and breathless. That might sound bad for a survival horror game, but *The Evil Within* is so gloriously, riotously disgusting that it's impossible to be swept along with it. I love it so much I've wrapped my keyboard in barbed wire as a homage. It's taken me *ages* to write this.

79

BELOW: True fear is dropping your contact lens on a grimy floor.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£16	Tango Gameworks	Bethesda Softworks

SPORT

TECH

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MUSIC

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BUYER'S GUIDE
Three expert builds to help you find the best hardware for you.

GROUP TEST

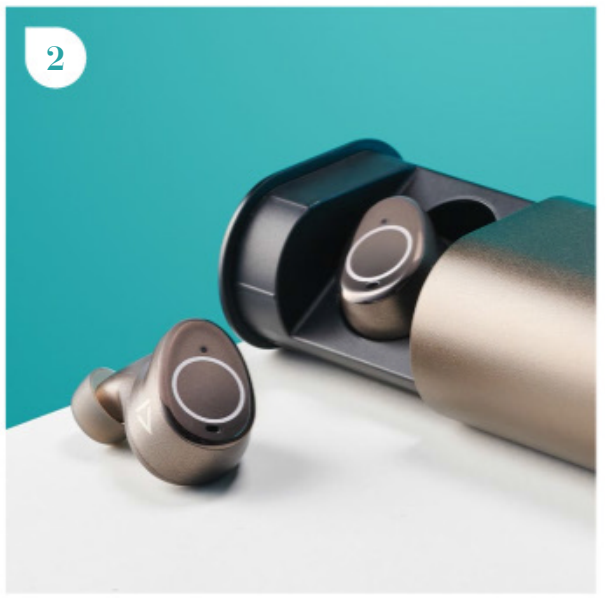
WIRELESS GAMING EARBUDS

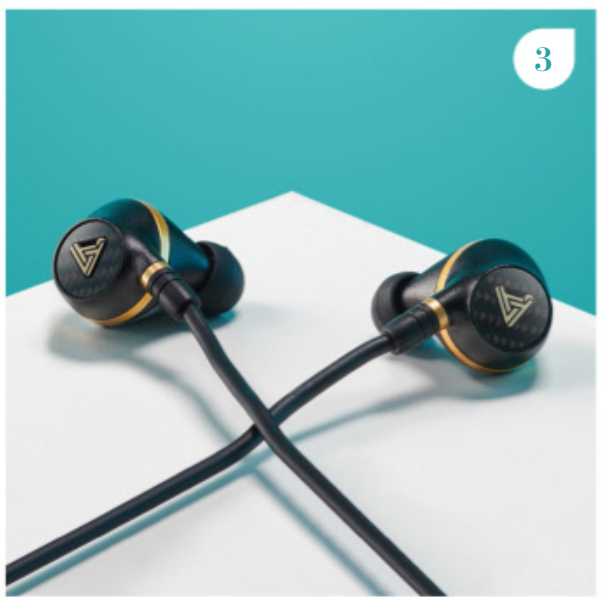
I've been sticking various things in my ears to find out what are the best wireless gaming earbuds for gaming on the go. *By Dave James*

Group Test

A traditional, over-ear gaming headset is a fine thing when you're sat at your desktop, chasing the peak aural quality that can only come from encircling your ear drums with the finest audio drivers. But when you're sat in a cafe working on that screenplay, novel, crusading like a king on your gaming laptop – or have finally managed to bag yourself that longed-for Steam Deck – a good set of wireless earbuds is key.

They're easier to carry around, can vanish into a pocket without issue, and will offer better noise cancelling than most circumaural headsets. The main things to look for are: audio quality, sound isolation, battery life, and an effective gaming mode. They're mostly going to sport Bluetooth connections, so you want to make sure to eliminate as much audio lag as possible.





Quantum TWS

JBL £129

Simply the best buds

1 I've tested a host of wireless earbuds recently and the Quantums are the pinnacle. They don't necessarily have the best sound, or the longest battery life, but they're the buds I now use on a daily basis of all the ones I have on offer. They're simple, feature-packed, sound great, and just plain *work*. That might seem like a given for any product put out by a reasonable headphone company in 2022, but it's not a guarantee by any means.

They're your classic wireless fare, aping the long-stemmed look of Apple's EarPods, but with a black finish. They come in a magnetic charging case, which helps extend the battery life of the buds themselves, and also holds the USB Type-C dongle allowing you to connect via 2.4GHz wireless as well as Bluetooth 5.2. That dual connection helps propel the JBL Quantums ahead of the pack; the switching is fast and the connection robust.

It's function over fanfare with the Quantums, but while they're not the best at anything they're really, really, good at everything.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → **Dual-connection**
- → **Super easy to use**
- → **Not the most stunning audio**

SPECS DRIVERS: 10MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ – 20,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.4OZ | 11G / **CONNECTION:** BLUETOOTH 5.2 | 2.4GHZ WIRELESS / **BATTERY LIFE:** 5 HOURS (ANC ON) | 16 FROM CHARGING CASE

Outlier Pro

CREATIVE £85

Infuriatingly almost awesome

2 The Outlier Pro buds are *almost* perfect. They're cheaper than the JBLs, lighter, last longer and the ANC is stronger... and now I'm writing that I'm questioning them not being my favourite. But those objectively positive features of the Outlier Pro are just one part of the wireless bud puzzle; it's the more ephemeral subjective experience of actually using them on a day-to-day basis that has them falling just short.

For a start there's a very specific area to hit on the flat outward facing surface of the buds to use the touch controls, and that's not always super easy when you're not able to see them. Then you have to double tap for play and pause, which is just crazy as it's the most common control you'll ever use. Single tap, people. Just one input, it's simple. And then there's volume control, which is split between left and right buds for up and down.

Which is annoying because the actual audio experience of listening and gaming through the Outlier Pro buds is *almost* enough to offset those ergonomic issues.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → **Great ANC and audio**
- → **Excellent battery life**
- → **Awkward touch controls**

SPECS DRIVERS: 10MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ – 20,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.24OZ | 7G / **CONNECTION:** BLUETOOTH 5.2 / **BATTERY LIFE:** 10 HOURS (ANC ON) | 60 FROM CHARGING CASE

YOU CAN JUST PULL THE BUDS OUT OF YOUR EARS AND THEY'LL IMMEDIATELY PAUSE

GROUP TEST

Euclid

AUDEZE **£1,249**

Seriously, how much?

3

If it was all about the sound I would be tripping over myself to recommend you stick Audeze's Euclid earbuds into your soundholes. The sound is delicious. Because when you're trying to describe audio quality it's important to keep using different adjectives, and because whenever I stick some high-res audio files through the Euclid buds I end up going, "Nom, nom, nom, nom." But how do I, in all good faith, recommend someone spend £1,200 on a set of earbuds? I'll wait for you to crank your jaw up off the deck... yes, they really do cost that much.

And if you want to go down the wireless Bluetooth 5.0 route then you need a £130 adapter wrapped around your neck.

I love planar magnetic drivers, and these are the first buds I've used that utilise them. Unfortunately the audio is a touch too sharp with music, but great in games, yet unlike over-ear versions doesn't soften over time. They're not the most comfortable buds, don't have a great battery life, but can sound amazing.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent audio
- Fast wireless gaming response
- Brutal pricing

SPECS **DRIVERS:** 18MM PLANAR MAGNETIC / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 10HZ – 50,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.53OZ | 15G / **CONNECTION:** WIRED OR BLUETOOTH 5.0 W/ADAPTER / **BATTERY LIFE:** 8 HOURS

ROG Cetra TWS

ASUS **£90**

Sounds like a let down

4

Whether connected to your PC, laptop, Steam Deck, or phone, the Cetra buds deliver an OK audio experience, and have a broad feature set that rivals the best on the market. With one minor, though missed, exception. I love the auto cut-out feature the JBL and Creative buds offer, which saves battery and means you can just pull the buds out of your ears and they'll immediately pause.

But the Cetra is still a good set of earphones... but not a great one. For me it's the actual sound quality which is where the Cetra earphones fall down, because everything else is right up there.

Sadly, the audio is kinda limp. It all feels very surface level, even when you muck about with the EQ settings. Strangely, for a gaming set, it seems tuned towards higher frequencies, and lacks any kind of oomph at the lower ends. You can enable Bass Boost via the Armoury Crate, but that just muddies the otherwise clear sound. In the end, it's that weak audio which makes the ROG just a fine set of wireless earbuds rather than a world-beater.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good all-round feature set
- Simple controls
- Easy game mode

SPECS **DRIVERS:** 10MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ – 20,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.21OZ | 6G / **CONNECTION:** BLUETOOTH 5.0 / **BATTERY LIFE:** 4.8 HOURS (ANC ON) | 17 FROM CHARGING CASE

BATTERY LIFE IS ONE PLACE WHERE THE GRAVASTER BUDS STRUGGLE

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Noise cancelling has long been one of the main benefits of in-ear headphones, but you'd be forgiven for thinking the over-ear world had caught up thanks to active noise cancelling (ANC). And you'd be right, to a certain extent. Smart ANC features can create impressive levels of isolation thanks to utilising external microphones to help adjust to the background noise and generate counter-audio to suppress it.

But earbuds haven't been resting on their laurels and the best in-ear headphones now offer their own active noise cancelling, which can be far superior to the sort you'd find on similarly priced standard headphones or gaming headsets. Thankfully the alt-feature, ambient aware, is also widely available, using the same external mics to filter *in* outside noise so you don't get run down crossing the street.

Sirius Pro

GRAVASTAR £00

Very much 'gamer' buds

5 Aesthetically, the Sirius Pro buds are the most 'gamer' of all wireless earbuds. The case isn't so much a case as a cage. Attached to a battery pack of a bottle opener. Really. Yeah, there is maybe a feeling that Gravastar is trying a little too hard to hit a particular niche of a user.

But hey, it's a crowded market, so why not do something to make yourself stand out? The thing is, you need to be able to also deliver on the fundamentals so that the thing which makes you stand out isn't the only thing you have going for you. And that's arguably where the Sirius Pro buds fall down. Battery life is one place where the Gravaster buds struggle. But it's the audio quality where I really have an issue, especially at this price. They seem to have been too heavily tuned towards the bass. While that doesn't muddy the rest of the audio, as I initially thought it might, it just becomes too overpowering after a short time. And there is some weird aural distortion when you enable game mode, too. In all, a no from me.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Strong gamer aesthetic
- Doubles as a bottle opener
- Weak battery life

SPECS DRIVERS: 7.2MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ – 20,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.21OZ | 6G / **CONNECTION:** BLUETOOTH 5.2 / **BATTERY LIFE:** 4 HOURS | 12 FROM CHARGING CASE

Onyx Ace Pro

TRONSMART £55

The bargain buds

6 I wasn't expecting a lot from the most budget of earbuds I've tested, but they're not bad. At full price I would absolutely recommend spending that little bit extra on the Outlier Pro, but if you're willing to ship from Tronsmart via its AliExpress storefront you're looking at almost half the £55 sticker price.

And at that level these are some great budget wireless buds. They have decent battery life, solid Bluetooth connection, and come with a dedicated gaming mode accessible directly through the headphones rather than via a separate app.

Sadly they're as leaky as a colander that's been sieving shotgun pellets direct from the muzzle. You can hear *everything*. If you're concerned about being oblivious to traffic when you're crossing the road, fine, but if you want to use these buds to game on the go you're going to suffer in noisy places. Though if you're after a good budget set of AirPod-a-likes for your Steam Deck the Tronsmart buds will still make for a solid purchase.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good price and battery life
- Responsive game mode
- Weak audio

SPECS DRIVERS: 13MM / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20HZ – 20,000HZ / **WEIGHT:** 0.14OZ | 4G / **CONNECTION:** BLUETOOTH 5.2 / **BATTERY LIFE:** 6.5 HOURS | 27 FROM CHARGING CASE

Dual-screen gaming setups make especially good editing rigs.

PRO TOOLS

Adventures in VIDEO AND MUSIC CREATION on gaming PCs

The hardware we amass and place upon snap-in thrones on our motherboards in the name of gaming frame rates is absolutely incredible. Our graphics cards can turn over gazillions of teraFLOPS, our CPUs laugh in the face of 4K video codecs, and our motherboards can interface with any piece of storage media created since Cool Britannia. And since by default we use that hardware very staunchly for gaming, reading about gaming, and talking to people about the things we've read about gaming, it comes as quite an epiphany to realise they can do quite a lot more, and to a high level, too.

Due to their typically powerful CPUs and GPUs, and large RAM capacity, gaming PCs also make very capable video editing machines. With the help of an audio interface they're highly adept music production stations too. They don't just run your games – they're ready to power your creative urges, too.

This writer's first foray into gaming PC music production came in the XP days, when Line6's revolutionary Guitarport dropped. A super simple audio interface with one stereo jack input, a USB connection, and 3.5mm connections for speakers or headphones, and a great big volume knob on the front. This £100 chunk of shiny red plastic was all it took to turn a *Knights of the Old Republic* rig into a compact recording studio in 2004.

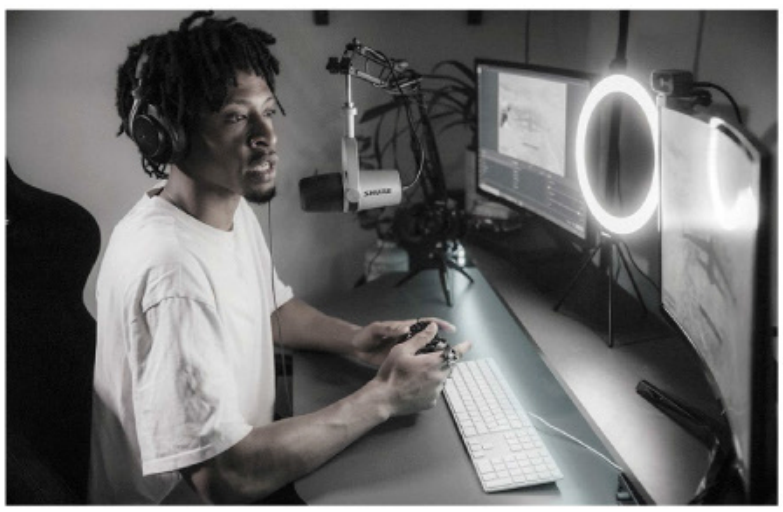
That bit of plastic changed my life, in some small way. It got me practising guitar much more, playing along with MP3s with my guitar's audio sitting in the mix, all coming out of the same speakers, as though I was there in the studio with The Strokes and The Cooper Temple Clause. I started recording covers of songs I loved, picking out the individual tracks and replicating the sounds and the mix as best I could. Ultimately, it led to me joining bands, touring, recording, and producing albums over many happy years. Quite the piece of plastic.

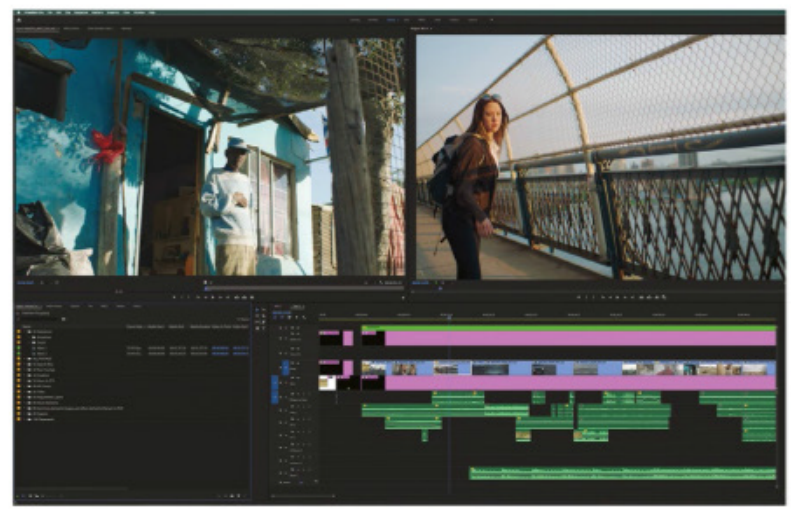
SHOCK AND DAW

Right now in 2022, you don't need much more than that. An audio interface like Focusrite's reliable budget option, the Scarlett Solo (£95) will let you connect any line instrument or mic to your PC. A digital audio workstation, or DAW, like Ableton, Pro Tools, or FL Studio gives you the software layer to pick up that input coming in from the audio interface, record the waveform, mix, and master it. While DAWs can be a both a steep time investment and a financial one, there are a good few free options available, and hours of in-depth tutorials on YouTube to help you become literate in sidechain compression, sending to bus, and plugin envy.

Mic check

Can streamer mics double up as studio equipment? Depending on their specs, absolutely. Mics with several polar patterns like Blue's Yeti X are useful for capturing different sources like vocals, amps or drum heads, but a cardioid-only mic is still fine. An XLR input (like Shure's MV7) will let you run it through your audio interface, too.





FAR LEFT: Streamer mics double-up as handy studio tools.

LEFT: Premiere Pro looks scary at first, but YouTube helps.

A SIMPLE STUDIO *Four things you need to build a production setup*

Image credit: Alamy

AUDIO INTERFACE
For bringing analog instruments into a digital software layer.

A MICROPHONE
To shout into, or record instruments. Streamer mics are fine.

MIDI CONTROLLER
Not necessary, but helps when programming drums.

INSTRUMENTS
To actually make the music on. MIDI can help if you can't play.

And that's it. You already have a PC with a beefy CPU that can handle low-latency audio and a bunch of different plugins throwing maths at your waveform. You already have tons of RAM to hold data in before it's committed to SSD. And you've probably got a pretty swift SSD, capable of delivering samples from huge libraries nearly instantly, and writing high-res audio to in vast quantities. You can even map the shortcut keys on your gaming keyboard to a different RGB colour, or use those dusty macro keys for things like creating new tracks.

If there's one element of a traditional gaming rig that's redundant in music production, it's the GPU. At least until the day someone builds a DAW in Unreal Engine. But over in video editing, that GPU becomes an incredibly sought-after tool.

ZONE OF THE RENDERS

There was a time when most video editing tasks happened on-die at CPU level. But as fidelity increased and sophisticated elements like After Effects graphics became more commonplace, CPUs were quickly overwhelmed by the complexity of the job. They're just not designed to deal with moving images of that size. Your GPU, on the other hand, knows exactly what's up.

Your CPU probably has between four and eight cores and eight to sixteen threads. If you've sat and watched the CineBench benchmark for as long as this former PC Format staffer, you know what a difference more cores and threads makes – your CPU can delegate different areas of a 3D image to individual cores in order to render it quicker. And of course, your GPU definitely has more of them than your CPU. Thousands more.

So you have 100% of a video editing PC already, on the hardware side. All that's left on the shopping list before you start creating is an editing suite. Premiere Pro, the industry standard, is available via Adobe's Creative Cloud subscription model for £20 per month, with After Effects available for another monthly £20 subscription. Like the DAWs above, there are in-depth courses from brilliant editors available on YouTube, along with certified courses on platforms like Udemy. Maybe you take your editing chops as far as documenting your finest hours in *Fall Guys*. Maybe it becomes a career change. Up to you.

IT LED TO ME JOINING BANDS, TOURING, RECORDING, AND PRODUCING ALBUMS

NEW INTERESTS

Often, it's sheer coincidence or a bored half-hour that sets off a new interest in your life, or even something as profound as a dream job. And gaming PCs, by happy coincidence for us, are by default specced with more than enough grunt for digital creation too. Many video editors I know began their craft through gaming – making YouTube videos, dabbling with Premiere Pro since they already had a gaming rig – and now splice together footage at industry level. Coming up through the ranks of music production as a gamer is perhaps less common, in an Apple-dominated industry, but still possible. Sometimes our beloved hobby can swallow all our free time – next time you're scrolling through your Steam library, not playing anything, try creating something instead.

Phil Iwaniuk

TECH TALES

CONSOLE YOURSELF

Post-pandemic, is PC gaming finally the BUDGET OPTION?

This is a year to sit and think about how much things cost. Many of us are feeling the sharp end of the cost of living crisis this winter, trying to balance the books so that we can simultaneously sustain our passion for virtual worlds and fend off frostbite. The status quo has been disrupted across society in the wake of the pandemic, and for those of us who count frames and get angry about ray tracing mods that actually only use screen space global illumination there's been a particularly bizarre paradigm shift: PCs are the cheap option for gaming now.

When the PlayStation first launched in December 1995, it came with a $299 price tag. A significant investment for the time, but still half the cost of the average PC. Prices ranged from $750 to upwards of $3,500, and while the market responded to accelerating home computer sales with a wider range of models and specs through the '90s, the point of entry remained consistently higher than a console's.

SOME WORK, ALL PLAY

That made sense on a consumer level. We could do so much more with a home computer than a console could facilitate. We could surf the 'world wide web', produce Word documents, draw cool graffiti in Microsoft Paint, and copy and paste Encarta articles on Sunday nights, subsequently considering our history homework complete. We could print off those crudely plagiarised assignments about the Tudors, record ourselves singing Mr Boombastic into a scratchy mic that came bundled with our magical beige workstation, and play it back at half speed on Windows 98's free recording software. We could play music CDs, make Word Art out of our names. And then, when we'd exhausted all that, we could load up *Quake II*. A PlayStation? A Nintendo 64? Nought but the playthings of a silly child.

FOR THE LAST DECADE, WHAT WE CONSIDER A GAMING PC HAS BEEN UP TO US

And that gap in the respective pricing models of PC and console gaming remained, generation after generation. Even the PS3's notoriously high $599/£429 launch price was a fraction of the cost of a Lenovo Thinkpad ($2,249) or Dell's XPS M1710 gaming notebook ($2,845) in 2006.

And then two things happened. The definition of 'PC' broadened, so that it included a Raspberry Pi and a quad-SLI (ah, memories) gaming tower. At the same time, indie gaming exploded, using the PC's easy digital distribution model to disseminate titles with low technical requirements and high concepts.

So for the last decade, what we consider a gaming PC has been up to us. It was the credit rating-ruining machine we bought to run *Crysis*, and also the laptop we got for uni coursework but actually just played *World of Goo* on. It was our *Cyberpunk 2077*-themed, RGB-laden abomination, and the Chromebook for *Stardew Valley* binges. The platform's great strength has always been its modular, upgradeable nature, and that galvanised it against even the recent obscene GPU price hikes we've endured due to crypto booms, pandemics, and subsequent semiconductor shortages. It certainly hasn't been easy to build a bleeding edge, 4K60 desktop machine in recent years, but we've been able to redefine PC gaming according to those challenges. In short, the last couple of years have been a great time to clear the pile of shame.

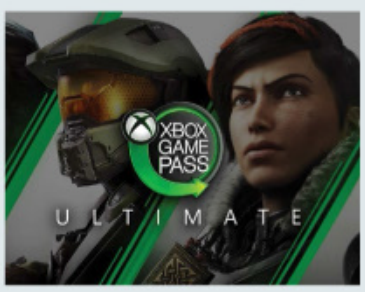
SHORT CIRCUIT

This has been our reality for a decade or more, but those industry forces haven't repositioned the PC as the budget proposition next to consoles until right now, here in the post-pandemic age, where we joke about people talking while muted on Zoom calls and reflect on the languages we were going to learn during lockdown.

The PS5 entered the market at £449, but that figure's been about as relevant as the price of an Nvidia reference

PHIL IWANIUK
Phil Iwaniuk is famed for his frugality and fiscal responsibility. Working diligently through his pile of shame to avoid wastage, he's reached 2002 so far.

CLOUD £10.99 *All the costs involved in a streaming gaming PC*



XBOX GAME PASS ULTIMATE
£10.99
Massive gaming library, running on the cloud.

ANY WINDOWS DEVICE
??
The cloud provides the power, so specs aren't important.

ANY SCREEN OR MONITOR
??
You just need to see the game. 240Hz can wait.

A CONTROLLER
£54.99
A luxury touch for the mouse and keyboard-averse.

GPU since launch. Low stock worldwide and an interrupted supply chain have forced the price up well beyond MSRP – and then Sony increased that MSRP by 20% in response to the economic downturn.

PC parts are affected by inflation too, of course – but we at least have the luxury of scaling down in spec as prices increase. And as for Xbox, whose Series X is priced to match PS5 and hasn't faced equivalent stock issues – what it offers simply isn't different enough to a PC to create a demand surge.

So here we are, in upside-down land. Where games consoles cost the Earth and the barrier for entry into PC gaming is now equivalent, since Valve's £349 Steam Deck launched. How relieved Sony and Microsoft must be that it's in short supply. Even without the new handheld, however bad things get, we can be reasonably certain of cobbling together some old components, digging out a retired laptop or persevering with our veteran tower build, and having something that'll run *Ooblets* while we shiver through the winter in three fleeces. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Since the Steam Deck came along, £349 has been a realistic entry point into PC gaming.

BELOW: It doesn't take much to run Ooblets. Just heart, spirit, and a 1GB DX10 GPU.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL

£948

MOTHERBOARD

B660M Pro RS
ASRock **£115**
This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.

PROCESSOR

Core i5 12400F
Intel **£170**
There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 3050
Nvidia **£239**
This GPU will deliver 1080p performance easily, and with 8GB of memory it's built to last.

COOLER

Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)
Intel **£0**
There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.

MEMORY

Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400
Corsair **£39**
You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.

POWER SUPPLY

CV Series 550W
Corsair **£39**
You could likely make do with less wattage, but Nvidia recommends a 550W PSU for the RTX 3050, so let's be safe.

SSD

MX500 500GB
Crucial **£57**
One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.

HDD

WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm
Western Digital **£37**
You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.

CASE

Zauron
Aerocool **£32**
This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.

DISPLAY

GW2280
BenQ **£105**
A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.

KEYBOARD

G213
Logitech **£40**
It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.

MOUSE

G102
Logitech **£35**
A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.

HEADSET

HS35
Corsair **£40**
This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL

£1,665

MOTHERBOARD

B660M Mortar WiFi
MSI **£180**
This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.

PROCESSOR

Core i5 12400
Intel **£170**
Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed.
Nvidia **£369**
The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.

COOLER

Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)
Intel **£30**
Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.

MEMORY

Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB)
Crucial **£75**
With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.

POWER SUPPLY

CX650M
Corsair **£93**
The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.

SSD

A80 1TB
Silicon Power **£98**
Silicon Power has delivered a high capacity, affordable SSD and has comes with some serious storage speed.

HDD

WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm
Western Digital **£37**
Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.

CASE

H7
NZXT **£120**
It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.

DISPLAY

S2722DGM
Dell **£260**
With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.

KEYBOARD

Alloy FPS
HyperX **£80**
As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.

MOUSE

Model O-
Glorious **£59**
Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.

HEADSET

Blackshark V2
Razer **£94**
The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL

£4,971

MOTHERBOARD

MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi
MSI **£410**
This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.

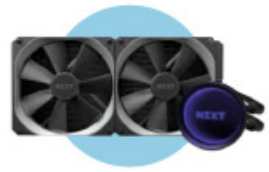
PROCESSOR

Core i9 12900K
Intel **£599**
Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.

GRAPHICS CARD

GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed.
Nvidia **£1,199**
The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.

COOLER



Kraken X63
NZXT **£123**
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.

MEMORY

Trident Z5 RGB
G.Skill **£421**
This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.

POWER SUPPLY

SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold
EVGA **£200**
This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.

SSD

WD Black SN850 1TB
Western Digital **£120**
Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.

HDD

860 QVO 2TB
Samsung **£195**
Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.

CASE

5000D
Corsair **£155**
We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.

DISPLAY

34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW)
Alienware **£1,099**
You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.

KEYBOARD

G915 Lightspeed
Logitech **£210**
Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.

MOUSE

G502 Lightspeed
Logitech **£110**
With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET

Arctis 7 Wireless
SteelSeries **£130**
If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

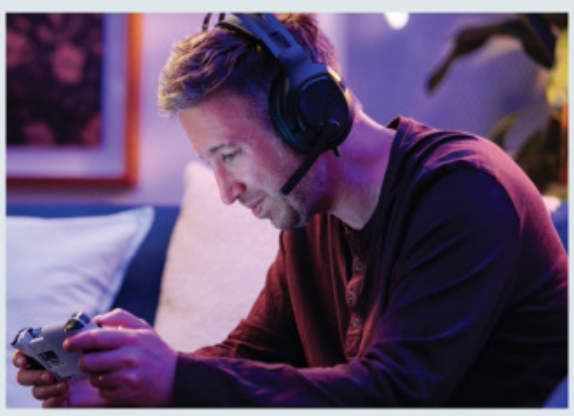
LEVEL UP YOUR GAMING ON THE GO

New phones appear all the time, and **O2 SWITCH UP** is the perfect way to make sure you're never missing out.

Like an anti-gravity ship careering along the futuristic race tracks of *WipeOut*, technological progress is zooming along at an unfathomable pace. It can be hard to keep up and easy to lose track, which is where O2 Switch Up comes in.

With O2 Switch Up, you can swap your phone for a new one at any point during your O2 contract with no extra costs. So if a phone comes along that looks set to satisfy all your gaming and other phonely needs, you can get it with minimal fuss and minimal cost. Incredibly, you can upgrade, downgrade, or sidegrade your phone as many times as you like!

But what do you switch up to? There are a lot of variables to consider, so here are some of the key features for keen gamers to look out for.



More Hz Means More Frames Per Second

The refresh rate of your phone screen (measured in Hz) is what dictates how many new frames it can display per second. The higher your phone's refresh rate, the more frames-per-second (FPS), and the smoother the movement is of the action on your screen, see?

Gamers love high refresh rates for that reason, and the good news is that these days you can get phones with 120Hz, 144Hz, or even higher refresh rates. As the saying goes, 'frames win games'.

On Cloud Nine

Did you ever imagine that you could play high-end triple-A PC games like Red Dead Redemption 2, Assassin's Creed, and more on your phone? Thanks to the miracle of cloud gaming, which lets you stream games from central servers straight to your device, that's now a reality.

A strong WiFi connection is a must if you want to do cloud gaming at home, but outside the home you'll want to make sure you have the fastest data connection possible, which is where our next point comes in...

Fast Mobile Internet

5G is taking over the world (some would have you believe it's literally trying to control your mind, but let's not go there). The super-fast mobile data protocol is so powerful that some people are replacing their traditional home broadband with it. It really is that good.

A 5G-ready phone (and accompanying contract) will ensure you can multitask online and game on the go. Want to play The Witcher 3 at the base of a tree in the middle of a park? With 5G and a cloud gaming subscription, you're all set!

Image credit: Andy Ford

Optimise and Accessorise

It's amazing how well you can play games on a touch screen, but sometimes you need that extra tactile touch. There are countless mobile gaming controllers out there – some styled like Nintendo Switch Joy-Cons with controls either side of your screen, others like more traditional gamepads with the phone resting on top. You can even get mounts to hook your phone up to your Xbox or PS5 controller. With Bluetooth 5.0, you can wirelessly connect controllers and other devices like wireless 5.1 gaming headsets, keyboards, and even mice.

A World of Gaming

Whatever types of games you play, you can swap to a phone that caters for it. We already talked about the miracle of cloud gaming, but these days phones can do so much more. Whether you want to play a mobile version of Call of Duty, Fortnite, or PUBG, or kick back with something simple and social like Words with Friends or Chess, a modern phone with a solid SoC (System-on-a-Chip) has you covered. Phones can be great retro gaming stations too, with emulation apps like RetroArch letting you relive all the classics from the SNES, PS1, and other consoles.

So How Do I Sign Up?

O2 Switch Up comes included in an O2 Plus Plan. Alternatively, those signing up to custom plans can get Switch Up as a £3.99 monthly bolt-on (Switch Up isn't available for SIM-only customers).

To switch up, go to an O2 store with your old O2 phone. The staff will check it to make sure it's in good condition and, assuming everything checks out, you can grab a new phone right there and then!

Your old phone will be in good hands. O2 resells your old device as a refurbished phone, ensuring nothing goes to waste during the Switch Up process.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

“It’s not easy to make a good shooter that’s also an open world RPG”

With the help of a better PC and a refreshed mindset, **CYBERPUNK 2077** is winning me back

The fall of 2020 was a bad year for me and open world games. After being disappointed that *Watch Dogs Legion* wasn’t the game I wanted it to be, I hoped *Cyberpunk 2077* could fill the science-fiction open world hole in my heart. As you can probably guess, it didn’t quite deliver.

At launch, *Cyberpunk 2077* was absolutely rife with frustrating bugs and bafflingly sparse quality-of-life features. There was definitely a one-of-a-kind game in there, but every compounding hour introduced new frustrations that I had to work around or begrudgingly accept.

It’s been almost two years since that first playthrough, and like many others who’ve been thoroughly enjoying the Cyberpunk Edgerunners anime series on Netflix, now seemed like the right time to give the game another go. Make no mistake: *Cyberpunk* is still largely the game it was in 2020, but CD Projekt Red has improved just enough about it that I’m ready to say it’s a fantastic game.

MORGAN PARK

THIS MONTH
Cruised Night City with my favourite chooms.

ALSO PLAYED
Foxhole, Hunt: Showdown

HOW TO PUNK

This time I made a female V with the Street Kid origin. At launch I was pretty adamant that Nomads had the coolest opening (what with the cool car and California desert sights), but I have to admit Street Kid is a way cooler role to play in Night City. My new V is already hip to the underworld workings of Night City. As a Nomad I felt like people were constantly having to explain simple stuff to me, but Street Kid V can hold a conversation in any company like she’s been there before.

I quickly noticed all of the small complaints that CDPR had managed to fix over time. Cars don’t feel quite as squirrelly. There’s now a dedicated walking keybind, so I can enjoy the superior combat of mouse and keyboard but slow down and take in the sights, too. The latest update finally added transmog, freeing me

TOP: V: the most morally grey supersolider superhero in the West.

I QUICKLY NOTICED ALL THE SMALL COMPLAINTS THAT CDPR HAD MANAGED TO FIX

I'd forgotten just how slidey Night City motorcycles are.

up to dress my V in cool clothes on her cosmetic layer and benefit from the stats of my best gear.

That's all well and good, but by far the biggest deal to me has been how much better *Cyberpunk 2077* is running. CPDR has made some performance gains over the years, but I mostly have my upgraded PC to thank. My first playthrough was on a RTX 2060 with a Ryzen 5 2600 CPU. It was a miracle I could maintain 60fps for a single uninterrupted minute at 1080p. Combat was clunky but functional and driving around the densest bits of Night City was an absolute nightmare. Now on a 3060 with a Ryzen 7, I'm finally have the experience I would've killed to have my first time around. Did you know what when Cyberpunk is running well, the combat is actually very good? It's not easy to make a good shooter that's also an open world RPG (just ask *Fallout*), but CDPR pulled it off, eventually.

Of course, there are still 1,000 little annoying things that persist in *Cyberpunk*, but I think it's starting to get to the 'charmingly broken' status that Bethesda games enjoy. Just last night I gingerly brushed against a car and sent it flying 300 feet in the air. I think it's still falling. ■

Bit of symbolism for you, there.

"You're given far too little agency"

Searching for clues in IMMORTALITY

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Progressed in a game by clicking on a boob. Sorry, mum.

ALSO PLAYED
MultiVersus, *Legends of Runeterra*

The FMV footage in *Immortality* – the latest game from Her Story developer Sam Barlow – is mesmerising. Covering three movies from distinct eras and styles of film-making, as well as the behind-the-scenes chaos of their creation, the clips you unlock as you play are atmospheric and perfectly crafted.

All together they form a tangle of mysteries to be peeled back in layers. You need to uncover the plot twists of the films themselves, but also the timeline of their creation, the messy relationships of the cast and crew, what prevented all three from being finished and released, and eventually even stranger secrets besides. It's an absolute feast of clues to pore over.

The problem is, you're given far too little agency in that peeling. You interact with the game by highlighting images in clips – a face, a body part, an object – which unlock other clips that feature a similar image. At first I thought this would allow me to, for example, spot a key in a scene and then uncover other scenes in which that same key appears, giving me an unconventional method of piecing together sequences. But no – clicking on a key is far more likely to take you to an unrelated clip of a different key.

CLIP SHOW

A face may lead to a different actor's face pulling a slightly similar expression. Objects sometimes lead to similar objects, but more often completely different ones. Even when the link is clear, you still don't feel in control of where you go next, especially as some of the cast appear in all three films. If you're trying to put together the plot of '70s detective drama Minksy, it's not much help to suddenly jump to '90s thriller Two of Everything, even if you are looking at the same actress.

The result is your journey feels random – a far cry from the simple but effective *Her Story*. It leaves me torn. On the one hand, I absolutely loved watching the footage, but discovering it was frustrating and obtuse. It's perhaps cliché to say, but I think I genuinely would've enjoyed it more as a TV show than a game – and given Barlow's clear talent for live action video, part of me hopes that's what he does next. ■

"My staple diet now consists almost solely of a late '00s Flash game"

Playing with new boundaries in BENNETT FODDY'S LITTLE MASTER CRICKET

As problems go, not having access to a PC isn't a huge one, but it's certainly irritating. You see, I am currently in the process of moving house, and that means half of my possessions are in a warehouse in the southwest, as there's not enough room in my temporary home for a tower. My laptop is designed for all work and no play, which might explain why I've become something of a dull boy and it means my staple diet now consists almost solely of a late '00s Flash game: *Little Master Cricket*.

What makes this undemanding browser game so riveting is that it's an early creation of Bennett Foddy. The game designer behind *QWOP* and the captivating *Getting Over It*, Foddy's creations present a set of challenging physics for you to negotiate, and *Little Master Cricket* is no different. Here, you have a bobbing cricket player whose bat is controlled by your mouse, and your only job is to smack away every ball that comes flying at you. There's a scoring system, but as you can imagine from the mind behind *QWOP*, it almost feels secondary to just being able to get bat on ball.

BEN TYRER

THIS MONTH
Waiting patiently to get my gaming PC back.

ALSO PLAYED
IndestructoTank, N

This is not the first time I've become slightly obsessed with this Flash game. Back in an early office job, I would constantly sneak a few rounds in-between working and conversations about what the best biscuit is, such was the magnetic pull of its peculiar physics.

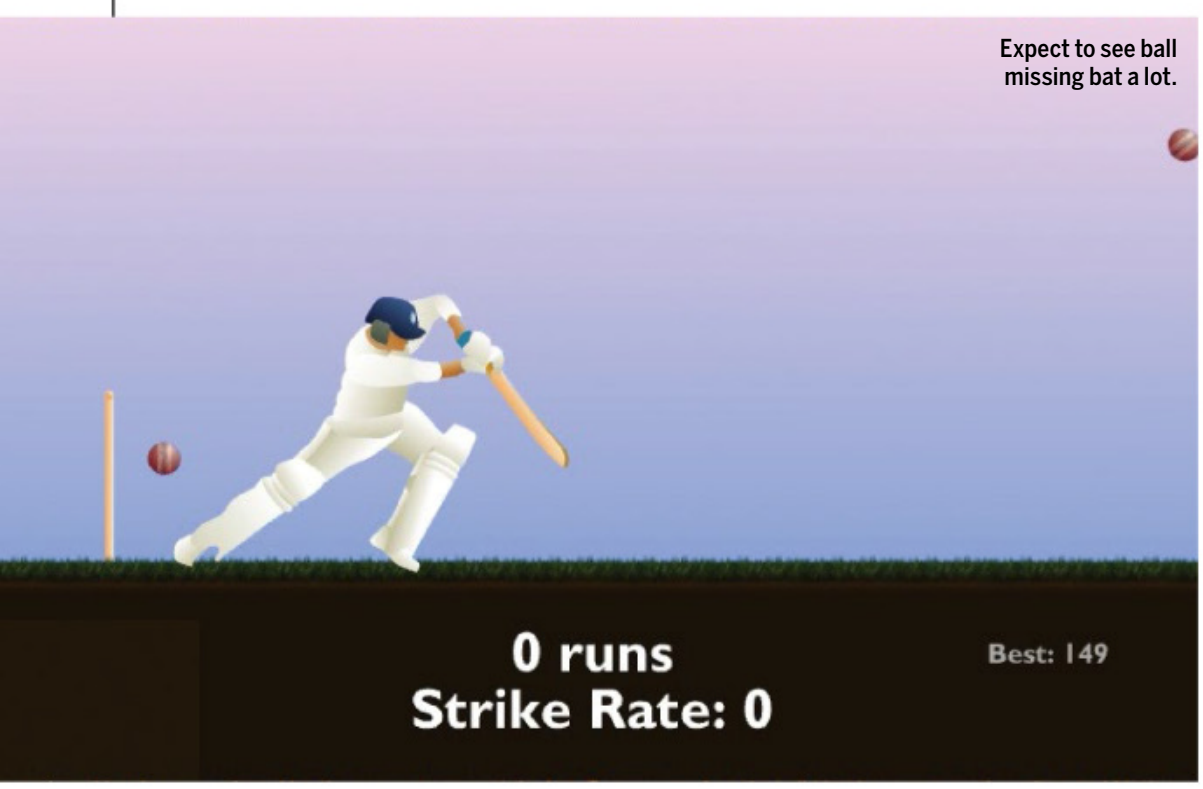
The batter wobbles unnervingly, like their limbs will take off without ever having the conviction to do so. Meanwhile, the balls that are fizzed in mimic the inconsistencies of real-life cricket deliveries. Some skid on from the pitch, keeping low and making them harder to hit, while others get stuck in the pitch and lose speed, instinctively making you go through your shot too early. But once you find the rhythm, it's rather easy to find yourself batting away for longer than you should.

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME I'VE BECOME SLIGHTLY OBSESSED WITH THIS GAME

FLASH IN THE PAN

Returning to *Little Master Cricket* is a reminder of what we've lost with the death of Flash gaming. Because of their ubiquity, as well as their limitations, the best Flash games grabbed you with a concept that was honed to time-dissolving perfection, instead of being calibrated to keep you coming back day after day. While that should be true of any game, the simplicity and accessibility of flash games meant your new favourite time-kill was just a few clicks away, no matter your set-up.

So just as returning to *Doom* or *Civ* shows how great design doesn't age, that's applicable to the Flash era as well, especially with the ball-hammering genius of *Little Master Cricket*. Maybe not having my PC isn't as annoying as I first thought. ■



Expect to see ball missing bat a lot.

BELOW: This batter might look ungainly, but he still could probably walk into the England team.

Putting the portable into 'portable cabin'.

SLEDGE

"Wanton destruction is not the way. Now it's about specific destruction"

Engineering the perfect crime in TEARDOWN

T*eardown*'s opening mission pitches it as a relatively simple game about destruction. Sledgehammer in hand, you level a building – enjoying the simple thrill of voxel architecture crashing down. But it's real genius comes when, in response to your early actions, your targets start fitting their valuables with alarms. Wanton destruction is no longer the way. Now it's about specific, purposeful destruction.

The alarm system turns *Teardown* into the best heist game I've played. When it's triggered, you have just 60 seconds to complete your objective and escape. Missions, then, become about manipulating the environment and your loot to create a route that can be achieved in the target time.

The first step is reconnaissance. I'm on West Point Marina, tasked with stealing a bunch of construction tools – all of which are, improbably, hooked up to an alarm system that will trigger whenever one is grabbed. The six items I need are spread out across the map. It would be impossible to walk between each one in the strict time limit given.

PHIL SAVAGE

THIS MONTH
Blew the bloody doors off.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2, Sniper Elite 5

Some are attached to alarms placed on buildings or welded to the ground. These are fixed points, meaning I'll need to work them into my route as is. But one, I notice, is attached to a cargo crate floating on a raft surrounded by scaffolding.

TOP TEAR

I pull out the blowtorch and get to work on the scaffolding, and soon it all falls into the sea. I commandeer a nearby boat and attach some cables between it and the raft. Now I can drive its contents – the cargo crate, its alarm, and the laser range finder I've been charged with pinching – closer to another objective.

I PULL OUT THE BLOWTORCH AND GET TO WORK ON THE SCAFFOLDING

The turbo nail gun, meanwhile, is attached to a portable construction cabin that's up on a nearby hill. The sledgehammer comes out, and I start bashing away at the flimsy walls until all that's left is a metal frame that's light enough for me to chuck down the steps below. I grab a crane, hook up the frame, and drive the whole thing to a better position.

Thanks to this prep, the route is looking more manageable, but there's still some refining to be done. With my planks, I create ramps and walkways to make routes over gaps. I steal some cars and place them strategically around, ensuring I've got transport between each objective. Now, finally, it's time to see if my work has paid off. Have I done enough to create a clean run? I stand by the first objective, hit quicksave, grab the item and start running. ■

ULTRAKILL

Ultrakill Act 2 delivers some actually good water levels. *By Ted Litchfield*

Reminiscent of the shareware FPSes of old, New Blood's insanely fast retro revival shooter *Ultrakill* has been releasing episode by episode in Early Access. The game is an absurd, sci-fi, grimdark retelling of Dante's Inferno, with bosses including the likes of King Minos and the Archangel Gabriel, and our protagonist is an adorable little robot that runs on human blood for fuel. Having depopulated the Earth, V1 and the robot armies turned to hell for fuel.

Act 2 was first broached in June 2021 with the addition of Greed, a collection of ancient Egypt-style levels in an infinite desert of scorching gold dust. Developer Arsi Patala finished up this middle third of the game in August, adding the layers of Wrath and Heresy, as well as new enemies and a riff on a classic, *Quake*-style rocket launcher.

The launcher is the only part of the act that hasn't quite landed for me, at least not yet. It's got a great view model, clearly inspired by the one from *Quake 3: Arena*, and it squishes back into its housing before springing back out again with every shot. I just don't know how to fit it in with my weapon rotation yet.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 3, 2020

DEVELOPER
Arsi 'Hakita' Patala

PUBLISHER
New Blood

LINK
devilmayquake.com

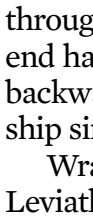
Indirect hits concuss enemies and send them flying, while direct hits against airborne enemies have bonus damage and AoE. The clear combo is to knock an enemy up in the air, then pinpoint strike end their career, *Team Fortress 2* Soldier-like. I just haven't been able to pull that off with any consistency as of yet. The answer is probably that I'm just not good at *Ultrakill*, not as good as I'd like to be at least. Checking the wiki for this writeup has revealed the existence of rocket surfing as a movement tech as well, so clearly there are realms of thought and feeling beyond my feeble understanding at the moment.

PICK UP STYX

The levels get my unambiguous, full-throated endorsement, the layer of Wrath especially. The Ocean Styx – flooded with all the souls from the robot wars, naturally – plays host to some actually, honest to god good water levels. 5-1 In the Wake of Poseidon, a nonlinear flooded cavern, starts things off strong. You get higher jumps and slower falls in the new environment, and I had a hearty chuckle when I finished the submerged level and saw its secret clear condition 'don't touch any water'. Still gotta figure that one out.

5-2 Waves of the Starless Sea really speaks to me: a sequence of rickety, Innsmouth-y scaffolding and shantytowns floating on the titular ocean, occasionally broken up with some surprisingly cosy interiors. It concludes with a solid boss battle against the Ferryman of the River Styx, a fight with a secret win condition tied to one of V1's weapon forms. When I realised the bit later, I had another hearty chuckle.

The star of the show is 5-3's Ship of Fools though. I'm a sucker for level



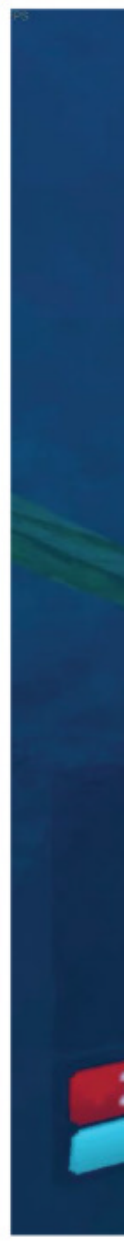
INDIRECT HITS CONCUSS ENEMIES AND SEND THEM FLYING

design 3D space gags and this mission goes for one of the oldest ones in the book. You first play through normally, and then at the end have to play through the level backwards and upside down as the ship sinks to the bottom of the ocean.

Wrath's boss, the mighty Leviathan, is a fun set piece but solidly a mid-tier offering for *Ultrakill*, presenting a similar giant fight to King Minos in Lust. If there's one thing at the top of my wishlist for *Act 3*, it's another boss fight that makes me feel like I did the first time against V2, Gabriel, or Minos' secret variant, Minos Prime. Those guys gave me that FromSoftware, Malenia/Isshin 'I am getting schooled here' feeling, and I want to feel that in *Ultrakill* again.

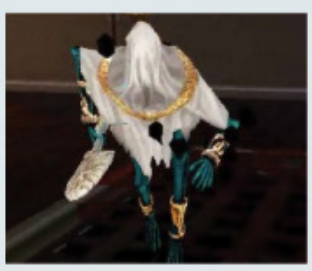
The red and black, classic *Doom*-y halls of Heresy are solid, but not quite as revelatory as anything in Wrath. *Act 2* ultimately concludes with a reprise boss fight against Gabriel, some interesting story development, and the promise of *Act 3: Godfist Suicide*.

But there's no time to rest on my laurels! Like *Neon White*, *Ultrakill* makes unskilled play look stylish and masterful play look obscene. I've got to figure out this rocket launcher, there are still secrets left to find, and by the way, there's a secret style rank for levels above S. It's called P rank. Time to get cracking. ■

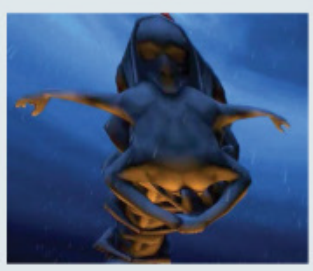


THE BIG GUYS

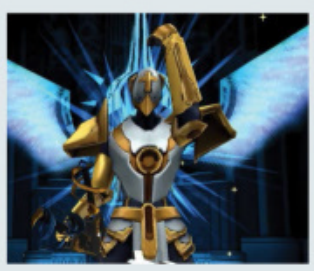
Imperfect Hatred features three main bosses



FERRYMAN
A speedy, acrobatic swordsman. I found getting a good screenshot of him more taxing than the fight itself, but there might be another way around this guy...

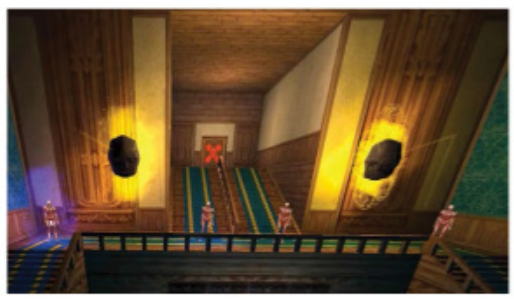


LEVIATHAN
This giant-scale boss requires mobility and acrobatics from you to avoid its area of effect attacks. It goes down easily enough with bullets though.



GABRIEL
The Judge of Hell returns as the Apostate of Hate. He's faster now, but getting into a rhythm dodging his attacks felt like slipping on a favourite pair of jeans.

This thing really does have a great view model.

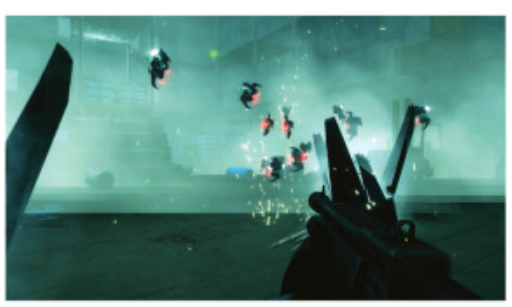


ABOVE: The Leviathan looks like it came straight out of *Bayonetta*.

LEFT: The ship's sumptuous interior is begging for a violent makeover.

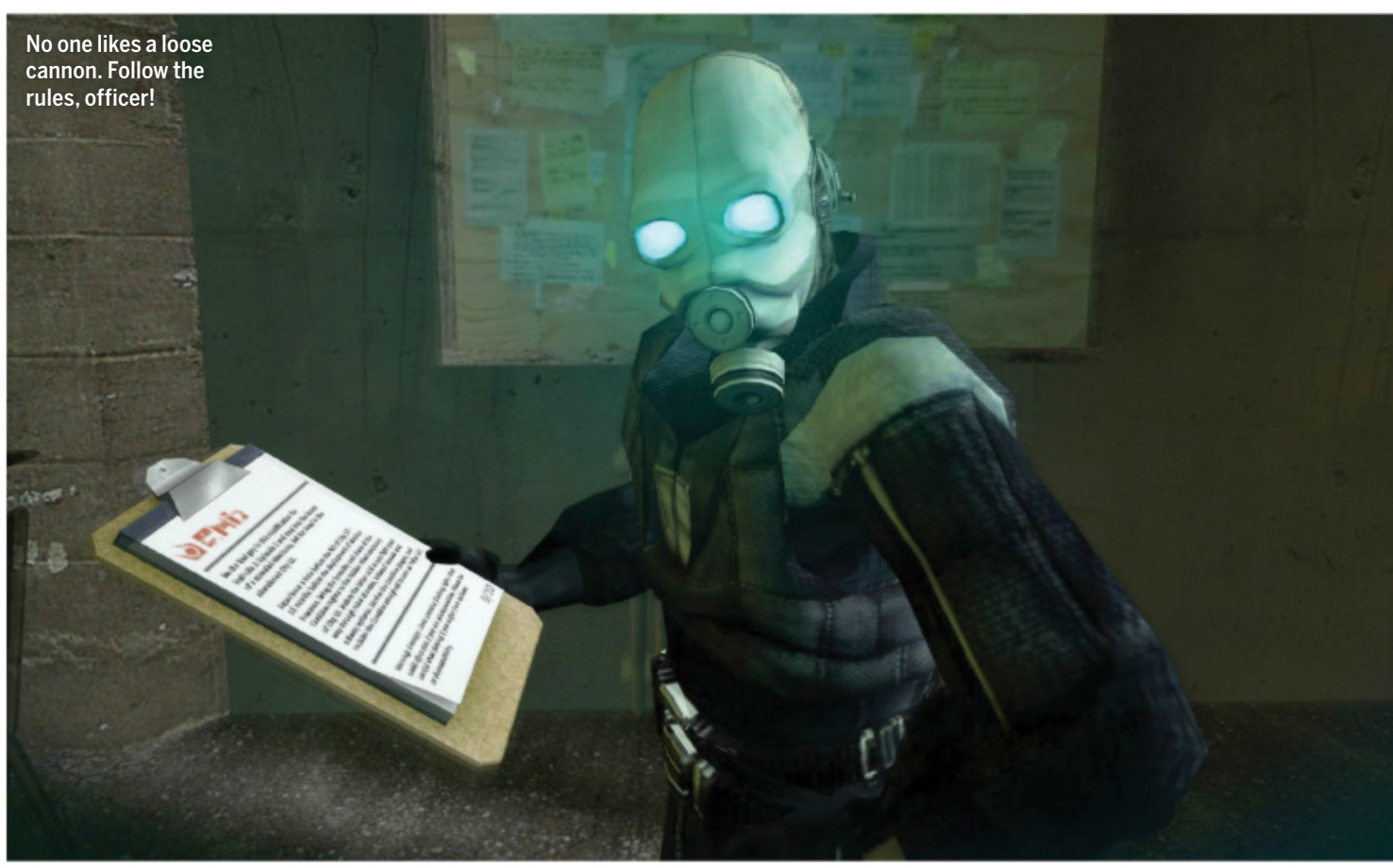
BELOW: The new levels begin with a water temple-y submerged city.

Nova Prospekt isn't safe for Freeman or for Combine.



ABOVE: All that Combine hardware is now on your side.

No one likes a loose cannon. Follow the rules, officer!



ENTROPY: ZERO 2

See *Half-Life 2* through new eyes. *By Christopher Livingston*

You know your *Half-Life 2* lore, right? The Combine invasion brought the Earth to its knees in a matter of hours, but then that pesky meddler G-Man took Gordon Freeman out of the dry cleaning bag in his interdimensional wardrobe and set him loose in City 17. No matter how many soldiers, drones and choppers the Combine threw at Freeman, it couldn't quell the rebellion. Turns out the only thing that could stop Gordon Freeman was, well, Valve itself.

The next time you decide to revisit the world of *Half-Life 2*, why not do it with a fresh perspective? *Entropy: Zero 2* is the sequel to *Entropy: Zero*, both *Half-Life 2* mods created by developer Breadman that let you play from the perspective of one of the Combine Overwatch. In the original mod you're a Metrocop in City 10, fighting against the human rebellion about a year before that nerd Freeman ever shows up. In *Entropy: Zero 2*, which was released in August, you get a promotion to Combine Elite and the timeline jumps ahead as you follow in Freeman's destructive wake.

OCCUPYING FORCE

If you never played the original *Entropy: Zero*, you don't need to worry. You'll get up to speed quickly as a Metrocop in City 17, wandering around the base and seeing humans being deprogrammed by watching the 24-hour Dr Breen talk show as you interact with other members of the Combine police force. It's not a glamorous existence: you'll see Metrocops with the fun job of torturing rebels, sure, but they also need to push brooms, replace lightbulbs, and carry clipboards around to make sure everyone's doing their job. It's a side of the Combine occupation you don't ever get to see: all the housekeeping and admin involved in dominating a planet.

And don't forget the Combine invasion was preceded by the resonance cascade which unleashed Xen creatures into the world, and those monsters are no fans of the Combine. In fact, your first task is Xen-related. Those pesky headcrabs have a way of winding up in the air vents, so you get to grab an electrified stun baton and go clear them out of the Citadel's ducts. Crawling through vents: it's not just for heroic physicists, it's also for rank and file officers. Unfortunately, it's not the last time you'll have to contend with Xen monsters. Not by a longshot.

LEVEL UP

You won't be a lowly Metrocop for long. The Combine may be harsh, but they reward loyalty and soon you're promoted to Combine Elite.

Your assignment is to track down Judith Mossman, the infamous double agent turned triple agent who first betrayed the human resistance and then backstabbed Dr Breen in *Half-Life 2*. Your hunt for the renegade researcher begins in Nova Prospekt, the former prison that's been turned into a processing centre for transforming captured humans

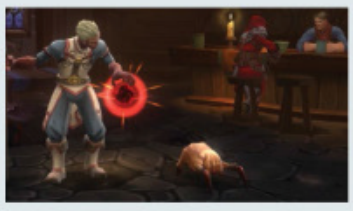
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE November 16, 2004	**DEVELOPER** Valve
PUBLISHER Valve	**LINK** entropyzeromod.com

YOU'LL GET UP TO SPEED QUICKLY AS A METROCOP

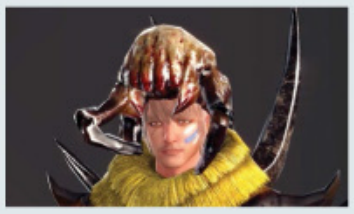
THINKING AHEAD

Half-Life*'s headcrabs sure do get around*

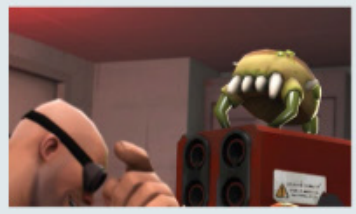


TORCHLIGHT 2
A headcrab can be your loyal pet in this action-RPG, carrying loot for you and fighting by your side.

DEATH STRANDING
Here you can wear a head crab, and it's not just cosmetic. It'll restore your stamina.



VINDICTUS
Vindictus has a headcrab hat as a reward for completing the event Strange Travelers.



TEAM FORTRESS 2
TF2 has a headcrab made of bread. A breadcrab. It looks a bit mouldy but we forgive it.

into Combine infantry and stalkers. If you'll recall, last time we visited Nova Propekt Gordan Freeman went berserk with a loyal army of antlions, and now you can literally follow his path of destruction, walking those same narrow corridors and prison cells Freeman once did. Gordo might have teleported himself out of there in the nick of time, but plenty of antlions remain, burrowing up through the floors and attacking everyone they see. With your squad you have to destroy their nests and take on a few rampaging antlion queens until it's safe enough for a dropship to land so you can continue your quest for Mossman.

As you clear out the ruined prison of the antlion infestation, you have several *Half-Life 2* weapons at your disposal, like the Combine AR2 and the MP7 with secondary grenade rounds. But the mod adds a number of new weapons, too, like a sweet gauss pistol that can fire hefty charged shots or single energy rounds, and some interesting new weapons that I won't fully spoil here. Let's just say your journey will take you through some new areas in familiar settings where you'll find some experimental weaponry to use against the human rebels. And they're a lot of fun, including a grenade that can open a portal to Xen and suck objects and enemies into it. The only problem is, it spits something back out, usually a monster that's not shy about trying to kill you.

VOCAL FRY

Something else that's fun in *Entropy: Zero 2*: your character talks. I know we're used to being silent in the *Half-Life* universe (with the exception of *Half-Life: Alyx*), but as Cognitive Unit 3650 (the closest thing you've got to a name) you don't keep your thoughts to yourself. And it's funny to hear your character react to surprising events in that deep, guttural, mechanised Combine voice. "Why do I always wind up in places like this," 3650 says wearily after once again finding himself in a dimly lit boiler room filled with pipes and rusty air vents. The completely monotone nature of the voice adds a lot of humour, too. "Nope," 3650 says without a trace of emotion when a massive irradiated zombie lurches from a pool of glowing toxic waste. "Shit. Shit. Shit," he says flatly while fleeing the hideous beast.

Zero 2 isn't just about shooting rebels and killing zombies, there's a storyline running alongside the mission to find Judith Mossman in the frozen north. Just as Gordon Freeman had his adversary Dr Wallace Breen, 3650 has a rival too, a mysterious Combine Elite soldier who appears on TV screens from time to time and tries to impede your progress. Finding out who your strange counterpart really is and what his goals are is part of the fun, and the story provides plenty of surprises as you delve into the mysterious motives of the Combine Overwatch and the ultimate toll of having your humanity stripped away to become part of the machine.

And when it comes right down to it, your Combine soldier isn't all that different from Gordon Freeman. Freeman drives a buggy in *Half-Life 2*, and you get to commandeer another type of vehicle: the Combine APC. A lengthy driving section awaits you in the frozen regions as you pursue Mossman to the site of the Borealis, the fabled research ship that has become legendary in the *Half-Life* mythos simply because players never got to visit it in the official games. Driving the APC is a blast, literally, because it's armed with rockets and a gauss cannon, both of which you'll need to punch through the surprisingly robust rebel defences. Luckily, you'll have plenty of help: there's a loyal hunter that follows you around, and you'll frequently get air support from a Combine chopper, which is frankly awesome. The driving sections of *Zero 2* are a lot like they are in *HL2*: speed around, blast your enemies, and stop occasionally to explore outposts and open gates so you can keep driving around.

THE MOD ADDS A NUMBER OF NEW WEAPONS, TOO

PUZZLE POWER

There are also plenty of diversions from straight-on combat. As you work your way through the levels, you'll engage in plenty of puzzle solving. Just like Freeman, you need access through various underground facilities and abandoned (ie: filled with monsters) structures. Generators need to be restarted, power needs to be restored, and there's an entire section of the mod where you wind up stripped of all your weapons and chased around by a terrifying monster. And you even get given an adorable, chatty sidekick for a portion of the adventure. You may look just like any other Combine soldier, but the experiences you have are that of a main character, even though you're actually the bad guy.

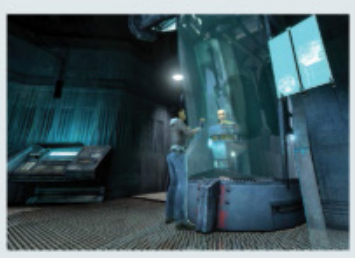
It's weirdly fun fighting for the Combine in *Entropy: Zero 2*. Just seeing rollermines tumble past or manhacks buzz by, not chasing you but aimed at rebels, is enjoyable simply due to all those hours spent fighting them in the original game. The writing is really great throughout (though so many deep, mechanised Combine voices can be a little hard to understand, so turning on subtitles isn't a terrible idea) and the level design is largely excellent, with just a few areas where I found myself a bit lost or couldn't figure out exactly how to proceed to the next objective. There are even bonus levels to play when you're done. *Entropy: Zero 2* is a fantastic mod that'll take anywhere from five to ten hours to complete, and any *Half-Life* fan should absolutely give it a try. ■

GORDON SPEEDMAN

Half-Life 2*'s vehicles, ranked*

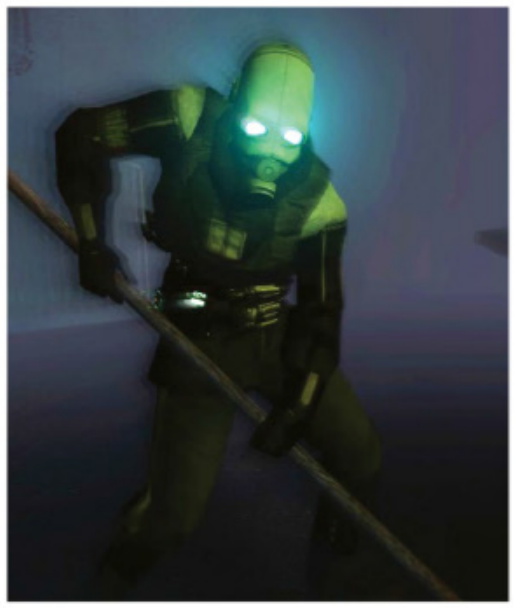
AIRBOAT
Spoiled it already, but it's the best. I will not explain and I will hear no arguments. 100/100

COMBINE APC
How many troops can even fit, unless they lie down and you stack them? 9/100



COMBINE PRISONER POD
Sure, it'll get you around the Citadel, but it doesn't even have a cup holder! 8/100

SCOUT CAR
Ugly. And does anyone have fun flipping it back over like a helpless turtle? No. 1/100



ABOVE: Dropships are a welcome sight, which is strange.

FAR LEFT: Turncoat Judith Mossman spotted.

Your squad will take simple orders.

DECIPHER AND GET STARTED IN

DESTINY 2

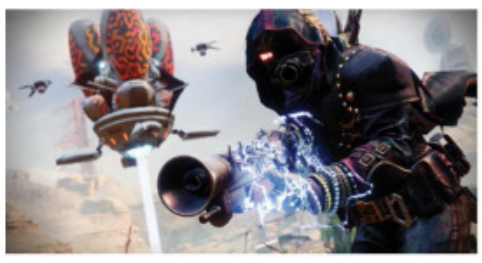
Here's what Bungie should probably tell you. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINK
Season of Plunder hub:
bit.ly/3dInOZ5



POWER THROUGH

1 Power level is all-important in *Destiny 2*. Equipping higher power gear will boost it, but before long you'll stop seeing an increase in your drops. This means you've hit the cap, and only Powerful, then Pinnacle rewards will give gear of a higher level.

ARTE-FACTS

2 You'll also gain power through your seasonal artefact just by playing, as well as mods to use in your armour. Anti-champion mods are important, since these stun the powerful enemies you find. Make sure you have the right mod equipped for each champ, though.

I LIKE THOSE MODS

3 More mods can be purchased from Banshee and Ada-1 in the Tower, whose selections change daily. Once slotted into weapons or armour, these buff stats, damage, ability cooldowns, or even add powerful new skills. Some mods only work with armour of a certain kind.

ENARMOURED

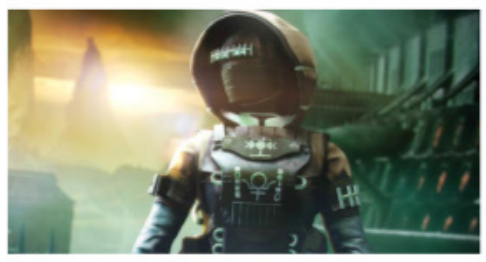
4 Ability cooldowns are also affected by armour stats, as is your ability to get shot up, and how quick you recover from it. The easiest way to get 60+ high stat gear is to focus Umbral Engrams into seasonal armour in the HELM, though you can also get it in dungeon and raid chests.

A GOOD STAT

5 Armour with high Resilience is always desirable since 100 Resilience reduces all incoming damage by 40%. If you want lots of a certain stat, slot an armourer mod into your Ghost, as this guarantees a high stat roll for all armour you get.

BEFORE THEY'RE GUN

6 Banshee and Xûr sell a fine selection of weapons every week with randomised perks, but if you don't have every god roll memorised, you might consider using Light.gg. This site is great for finding out if your gun is good or not.



DIM

7 Another great third-party site is Destiny Item Manager. Though Bungie has said it's introducing loadouts in *Lightfall*, DIM already lets you create them and move gear between your vault and character without having to visit the Tower at all.

LOOT POINT *Plunder the most powerful weapons and armour: Exotics*

TINKER TINKER

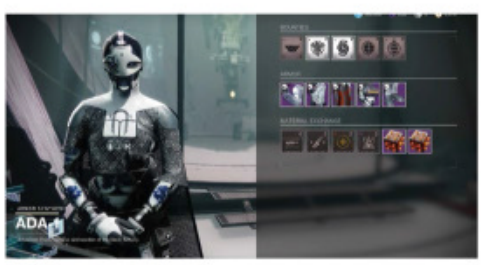
8 Weapon crafting was introduced in *The Witch Queen*, but you don't need to own it to make them. Aside from Exotics, crafted guns are the strongest in the game, since as you level them up you can choose what perks you want, removing the randomness of rolled weapons.

A DEEPSIGHT BETTER

9 Red border weapons are used to unlock a craftable version of each gun, but not every red border is craftable. You can see the full selection in the 'Triumphs' menu, but you'll want to dismantle them, or kill stuff with them to unlock progress while keeping the weapon.

THRIFTY FASHION

10 Looking good while shooting stuff is a big part of *Destiny 2*, but you don't need actual money to get cosmetics. Bright Dust is rewarded for certain season ranks and extra bounties from Zavala, Shaxx, and The Drifter. This lets you purchase a selection of cosmetics.



PATTERN AND WEAVE

11 You can also turn regular armour sets into cosmetics. Grab a synthweave bounty from Ada-1, complete the objective, then head back to create a Synthweave Strap. This item lets you transform a single armour piece into a wearable cosmetic.

FEEL THE BURN

12 The last things to take into account are Burn and Shields. In *Destiny 2*'s high level activities you'll have to break shields to damage certain enemies. Burn, on the other hand, is which element deals more damage, so be sure to bring DPS matching it.

MEETING (AND KEEPING) THE NEIGHBOURS IN THE SIMS 4

The Klemps have just moved into Willow Creek. Pray they don't invite you to dinner. ***By Matt Elliott***

Let's start with a joke. A man visits a doctor acclaimed for his ability to treat melancholia. "I can't eat, I can't sleep, I can't go to the toilet," says the man. "Please help me." The doctor thinks, then replies, "Laughter is the best medicine. The legendary clown Blompo is in town. He's exquisitely funny and will cure you of all your ills." The man looks at the doctor. "That won't help," he says. "Why not?" replies the doctor. The man shrugs. "I *am* Blompo."

"Also," he adds. "I'm trapped in the crawl space of the demonic house. And so are you, otherwise we wouldn't be talking." Both the doctor and clown weep uncontrollably. Laughter! Applause! Curtain down. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. This month's diary is no mere novelty train ride through the human psyche. No. We're taking a simple, suburban family home and turning it into a dark mirror of society. What follows is nothing less than commentary on the decline of neighbourhood values and the death of the big society. It's also a story about people in boxes wetting their pants. We'll get to that too.

WARDROBE TORMENT

Your hosts on this journey are the Klemps, a mysterious family eager to move into their new Sim neighbourhood. It takes a long time to create the Klemps, because I want them to be perfect. They have to be exactly the right sort of sinister. They must look benign enough to approach and evil enough that you've got nobody else to blame when they are entombed in their walls. After trying a few classic options – sinister clown, robed cultist, young Tory – I settle on an aesthetic I like to call 'Cannibalcore'. Maximiliano and Wilhelmina Klemp become flesh: knitwear models for a suicide cult.

They creep into their new home, Daisy Hovel, and I set about my plan: to collect a handsome and diverse range of people from the neighbourhood, and arrange them for the Klemps' viewing pleasure. As anyone who's ever constructed a secret underground dungeon knows, however, substructures can be expensive. The sinews of large-scale human abduction, as the saying famously goes, are infinite money. Lucky, Wilhelmina has a rich relative who disappeared under mysterious circumstances, so the Klemps have some capital to build their nightmare home. Somebody should probably check the walls of the house they just moved out of.

I decorate their abode as tastelessly as the unmodded game will allow: violent pattern clashes, sinister fandangles, unexplained void spaces. It's like living in a migraine. This is the sort of building that will make its unwilling residents glad to be encased in featureless cupboards. Underneath Daisy Hovel, however, it's a different story. A simple reinforced door leads down into a bare brick basement filled with mannequins and sickly fluorescent lights. We call this Wihelmina's garden. You'll find her down here on bright days, dancing with the featureless fibreglass inhabitants, taking gulping breaths of the clammy cellar air.

"I'M TRAPPED IN THE CRAWL SPACE OF THE DEMONIC HOUSE. AND SO ARE YOU"

The structures in place, all that's left is to change the name of the house. 'Daisy Hovel' sounds like a character from a cancelled British comic book, so I rename my property 'The Feast of Meats': a name that's unsettling in a rather non-specific way. *Feasts* are nice. *Meat* is nice. But a number of meats, of unspecified origin, is upsetting.

MEAT THE NEIGHBOURS

Maximiliano and Wilhelmina step out to meet the neighbours, and, almost immediately, viable additions to their collection shamble into view. But I quickly encounter my first problem. It's basically impossible to keep visitors trapped underground. The moment I remove the staircase they teleport back to safety. A small part of my dark dreams die, and Wihelmina's garden goes untended. But the Klemps are not so easily defeated. If they can't build their collection in the traditional way, underground, away from the judgemental eyes of their neighbours, they'll improvise. The very walls of The Feast of Meats will become a prison. On the outside, their house will look deliciously plump. On the inside, it will be a panopticon of despair. A gallery of soundproofed screams.

As the more gregarious and outgoing Klemp, Wilhelmina is the first to collect a trophy. A perfectly harmless teacher, known in her former life as Mei Prescott, catches her eye, mainly because her tired, monochrome clothing offends Wihelmina's explosive sense of style. And while Mei escapes the basement dungeon, it's a simple task to build a wall around her mid-conversation. She doesn't seem especially bothered because modern Sims have mobile phones. She spends her first few hours browsing the internet, presumably posting about how she's trapped in a coffin (#entombed

THE RULES

1. Add at least one neighbour to the gallery every day.
2. Vanilla game only. Expansions are allowed, but no mods.
3. Dead person smell lowers property value. Guests have to survive.

Dance like nobody (alive) is watching!

#helpme #thereisonlydarkness). It doesn't matter: our first asset is installed. Wilhelmina makes it 2-0: she spots someone sprinting by, invites him into chat, then adds him to the kitchen wall. Don Lothario is a disappointing addition, though. I foolishly leave him enough room to exercise and he's so busy doing lunges I'm not even sure he knows he's been kidnapped.

Maximiliano is falling behind, probably because he hates sunlight and has the social skills of a cheesegrater. Whereas Wilhelmina is a sleek cheetah chasing down her prey, right down to the animal print, Maximiliano is more akin to an African bullfrog or trapdoor spider. He's an ambush predator. But he has a plan. If Maximiliano won't go to the mountain, the mountain must come to Maximiliano. There are a few left-field ways of bringing other Sims to your property, and he chooses the weirdest one of all. He spends some time pondering artwork of a sad clown. Enough time, apparently, to manifest said clown in The Feast of Meats. There's nothing in the rules about imprisoning personifications of your inner turmoil, so into the wall he goes. Best of all, it's around now that I notice, for some reason, Maximiliano has a clown's face when he changes into his bed clothes, presumably as a hangover from those first tentative character creation moments. This feels like an especially pointed mockery of my new visitor. The Talented Mr Ripley, but with greasepaint and pompoms.

Against all expectations, Maximiliano evens the score when some minor celebrity, Thorne Bailey, invites himself over. It's the sort of thing you can imagine Sir David Attenborough narrating, "The Minor Celebrity brazenly sits down to watch TV in The Feast of Meats, unaware of the imminent danger. It's already too late. Maximiliano strikes! And the celebrity goes into the larder." As a fitting punishment, Thorne's misery cupboard is opposite the telly, as a permanent reminder of his transgressions. This feels like a big win for Maximiliano. Not only is it an act of pure opportunism, but this is the first neighbour who feels like he truly deserves to be here. And, even more pleasingly, his celebrity status means he's *literally shiny*. Wilhelmina will be consumed with jealousy.

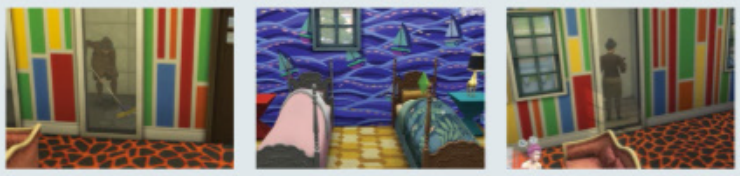
On a functional note, I decide to add windows to the cells. This isn't so the Klemps can observe their chattels, you understand; they see them more as living insulation than people, and voyeurism is so passé. Instead, this is so their new guests can experience the true horror of The Feast of Meats. It's not just the loss of liberty, but the cloying, inescapable spectre of the Klemps living their horrid lives. When you become a feature in the Klemp gallery, you are not just staring into the abyss, but also watching two sexless human cardigans flirt so painfully that sometimes, they literally have to hide in bed out of embarrassment. Death would be a release.

So far I've made this setup sound perfectly idyllic. But there are some issues with The Feast of Meats. The first is that my front door keeps having to move, which is disrupting the feng shui of Chez Klemp. At one point I try to encourage people to come in via the basement, still holding onto the hope of populating Wihelmina's garden, but it's too much of a faff. Instead, I decide that the entrance to The Feast of Meats should only appear when the house hungers for new flesh. It's something straight out of a Clive Barker book. *"Beware the blue door," the neighbours whisper.* The second issue is with the Clown. I learn the only thing worse than a talented clown is a useless one. Every time he tries to juggle, he ends up dropping his balls, triggering a sad trombone noise that plays, on average, around every five seconds. If Maximiliano and Wilhelmina weren't already criminally insane it's the sort

SHITEMOVE

Would you live in a house like this?

Are you looking for a thrilling INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY? Look no further! This unconventional property, in need of significant updating throughout, is nestled in picturesque Willow Creek. The ground floor provides a sizeable reception room along with a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom, as well nine reinforced, metre-square cupboards that would be perfect for storage if we could open them. Significant staining throughout. Property may still be needed as evidence in ongoing criminal investigations.



BELOW: Come 9pm, Maximiliano turns himself into Blompo the Night Clown.

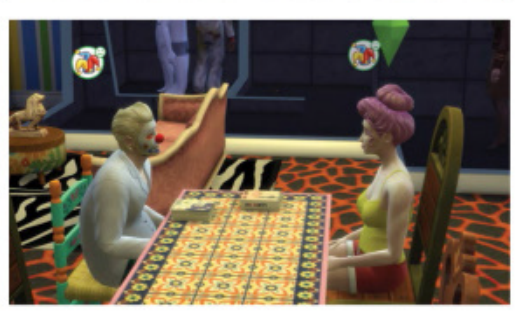
AFTER A FEW DAYS OF NO FOOD, SLEEP, OR TOILETS, OUR GUESTS ARE IN POOR SHAPE

of thing that would certainly nudge them over the edge. Luckily, Wilhelmina is talking to herself and Maximiliano is standing in a corner, crying. Everything is fine!

URINE TROUBLE

After a few days of no food, sleep, or toilets, our guests are in poor shape. I catch Don doing press ups in a pool of his own urine, and Thorne does nothing but scream. To lighten the mood, they allow my wall pigs a morning of exercise, ablutions, and brief conversation. I build a rat run between cages then open the doors so the inhabitants of the gallery can stretch their legs and chat. It's not much of a party. The clown sleeps on the floor. Mei refuses to use the bath because a stranger is watching. Disappointed with these despicable ingrates, I tempt them back to their nooks with the promise of a working toilet, then lock them back inside.

As a punishment, I decide to find new ways to make them unhappy. The simplest way to do this is to make Maximiliano cook. He's so bad at the culinary arts that his meals actually make Sims depressed, which is perfect. He also hates cooking, which feels like I'm getting extra misery as part of the bargain. My only worry is that, over time, Maximiliano's culinary skills will improve and he'll end up making his acquisitions happy. Or at least, not-miserable.



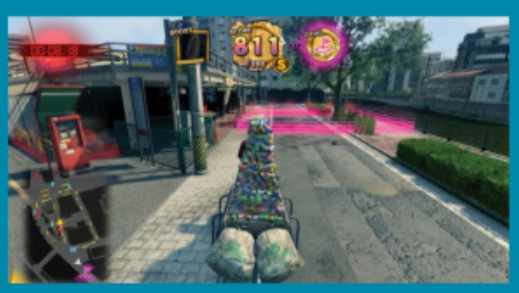
OUTLIVE, LAUGH, LOVE

I know what you're thinking. "This all sounds wonderful. How could anyone be unhappy when life offers such bountiful fruits?" And you're partially correct. But I can't help but feel for Wihelmina, who spent so long designing the perfect basement dungeon, only for it to go empty and unloved. As we've established, it's impossible to keep one of my Sim neighbours locked underground. But the same isn't true of my actual Sims. And, if we're honest, Maximiliano and Wilhelmina do seem to be drifting apart. She loves the taste of human hands. Maximiliano prefers ears. Apples and oranges. That's why, one night, as Maximiliano changes into his clown outfit to go to bed, Wilhelmina tempts him into the cellar with the promise of WooHoo. But there is no WooHoo in the dark place. Only mannequins and clown paintings and a space where the staircase used to be. You are reminded, no doubt, of the tale of Perilaus of Athens, who was burned alive inside the brazen bull, the very torture device he himself invented. Some days you imprison the clown. Other days, you are the imprisoned clown. I told you this was going to be deep. ■

ABOVE: TFW when you're not invited to the Klemp tickle party.

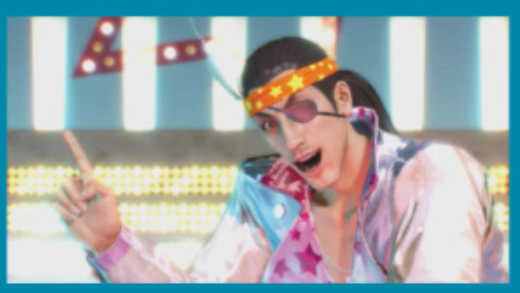
YAKUZA'S RUBBISH MINIGAMES

They've won me over with their irrepressible charm. *By Fraser Brown*



FAR LEFT: Unwind at the batting cage after a long day smashing thugs through tables.

RIGHT: A minigame doesn't have to be fun to be *fun*, you know what I mean?



Encountering a minigame typically inspires much groaning and huffing from your's truly. It doesn't matter if it's working out in the gym in *Final Fantasy VII* or hacking a vending machine in *BioShock* – I'm almost guaranteed to hate it. Mechanically simple but often frustrating, they feel like filler that's getting in the way of the good shit. *Yakuza* is a peculiar exception to this rule because the series is full of them, most of them are rubbish, yet I still love them.

The epic dramas of Kazuma Kiryu and Ichiban Kasuga are serious business, full of betrayal, redemption and plenty of beat downs. At any given moment there are lives on the line and the fates of various yakuza clans and even entire cities hanging in the balance. With all this pressure bearing down on the heroes, taking a few hours out of their day to play darts, drive go-karts, and win stuffed toys might not be the best use of their time. Where are their priorities?

Yakuza makes this work because it thrives on these weird juxtapositions. The main storylines might be overflowing with drama and high stakes, but between these quests are countless sub stories that frequently veer into the absurd. It can be jarring at first, but after so many games I no longer bat an eyelid when a stranger asks me to become a movie producer while I'm meant to be untangling a criminal conspiracy.

Things can get pretty bleak for the former yakuzas as they're betrayed by friends and family, and the primary plots are often obsessed with the minutiae of Japanese real estate and politics – it's all heavy stuff. So these wacky breaks really feel like a necessity. It's not filler. It's self-care. Escapism. Who among us wouldn't be ready for some hi-jinks and fun after a day of dealing with corrupt cops or getting bruised and battered by yakuza enforcers?

Of course there is one significant difference between the sub stories and the minigames: the sub stories are usually brilliant. They are immediately and obviously appealing in a way that playing darts yet again absolutely isn't. The minigames, at first, seem designed to be ignored. Just so we're clear: I don't mean the various business ventures you can undertake. The hostess club, real estate company, and their counterparts are all super involved and series highlights. I'm referring to the more throwaway diversions. For the most part, they are absolutely optional. But within them are moments of brilliance that ensure I have to check them all out.

I've mentioned darts a few times because it's also a game I hate in real life. But I still love seeing Kiryu's look of dismay when he loses, or that little fist pump when he wins. And sometimes minigames like darts are used as activities during dates, making them just meaningful and rewarding enough to keep playing.

BULLSEYE

The pleasure I get from *Yakuza*'s minigames has less to do with the games themselves and more the effect on the characters. I love seeing these tormented badasses unwind after a long day. Karaoke and dancing are where this reaches its zenith. On a purely mechanical level these are at best mediocre rhythm games, but that really doesn't matter when the tunes and moves are as delightful as they are. Seeing a stoic ex-con turn into a J-pop idol or pull off a cracking Travolta impression makes my day.

Putting in the time also reveals new sub stories, like *Yakuza 0*'s lovelorn pocket circuit racer. So these aren't just time wasters – they're another way to meet new people and solve their problems, something that lies at the very heart of *Yakuza*. Racing minigames like the pocket circuit diversion also tend to be the most fleshed out, with a bit of progression in the form of vehicle customisation and tournaments, as well as the occasional rival.

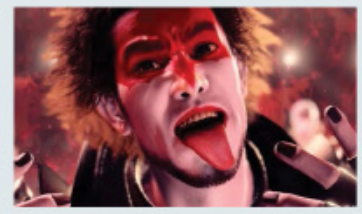
THESE AREN'T JUST TIME WASTERS – THEY'RE ANOTHER WAY TO MEET NEW PEOPLE

Yakuza revels in this kind of silliness, while taking it seriously. The way Kiryu and pals treat each minigame like it's the most important thing in the world is infectious. The series is full of stuff that in another game would come off as incredibly naff, but *Yakuza* just makes it work, bringing all this weird shit together in one infinitely compelling experience. And I love *Yakuza* minigames because I love *Yakuza*. ■

MINIGAME MASTERWORKS

The best minigames across the series

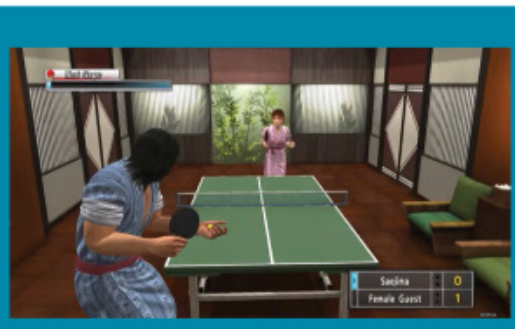
DISCO
Yakuza 0's disco minigame is a simple but sometimes tricky rhythm romp.



KARAOKE
I'll always have a soft spot for *Yakuza 0*'s karaoke thanks to its '80s setting

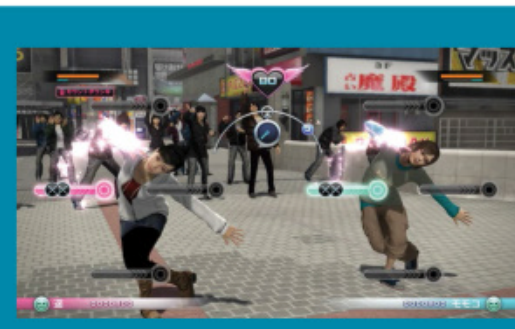
DRAGON KART
Like a Dragon's racing game takes its cues from *Mario Kart*, and the races are just as chaotic.

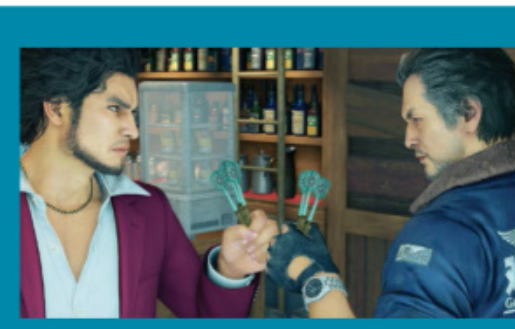
ARCADE GAMES
You can find classic Sega arcade games, and even a few fictional ones, throughout the series.



LEFT: You can't spend all your time obsessing about fighting and real estate prices.

RIGHT: Now why would a gritty crime drama *not* have a dancing minigame?





I have enjoyed tinkering around in this editor, carving out my own fun

Making you feel like one tiny player, lost in a sea of chaos, is *Arma 3*'s special ingredient.

ARMA 3

This story is for all those map editors who fight boredom. *By Samantha Greer*

I don't care much for military simulators. *Arma 3*'s brutal pursuit of realism can forge tense missions and swift deaths but it's typically bogged down in a dedication to military strategy more likely to please hobbyist dads with miniature tank collections. All the love in the world to you guys, no judgement here. It's just not really my bag. Yet, I cannot get enough of *Arma 3*. Like its predecessor I keep returning. But it's not for the campaigns or the multiplayer. It's that wonderful little mission editor.

Going all the way back to *Operation Flashpoint*, I have enjoyed tinkering around in this editor, carving out my own fun. Like a kid with a sandbox full of (suspiciously realistic and co-ordinated) army men, I have spent years throwing together my own little battles and set pieces. Combined with mods, these games have always provided a way to create little novelty ideas and stories, turning them into something unpolished but tangible. Oh sure, with enough time I could probably make them good enough to be publicly available. I already spend time fine tuning them or at least the parts that interest me. Well-timed music cues. The perfect time of day to compliment a vista. A jet rushing overhead at a pivotal moment. Even the basic waypoint interface and triggers allow for a fairly detailed customisation of events, so no coding is required by any means.

TOYS, NOT TOOLS

There's an argument to be made for its utility as a tool for teaching some game design. I can certainly see a pipeline here for aspiring designers to practice and learn. There's a wealth of tools here and scripting is there for those who want to build far more complex missions beyond what the easy to use options allow. Have a gander through the player made missions being shared and you'll find some really compelling stuff, bending *Arma 3* to accommodate more interesting scenarios than it was ever designed for. For me though, it's simply playing. I'm not really making anything that's for anyone but me.

Arma 3 took this to a whole other level. The mission editor in previous games was limited to an abstracted map screen, which made the fine tuning a bit trial and error as you dove into the mission repeatedly just to see if two objects lined up like they were supposed to. With *Arma 3*, they introduced a full on 3D view so you can place everything perfectly and see exactly how it'll look in-game, speeding up the process immensely. It's also a nicer looking game, and its Greece inspired setting is unique among military shooty games. Though with mods and DLC, you can go anywhere from jungles to the vast Sahara desert. The Zeus mode, a multiplayer tool which essentially lets one player take on the role of GM for

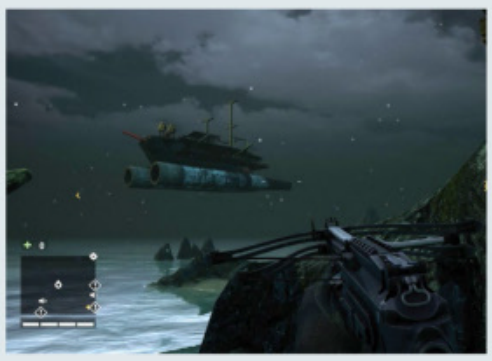
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE September 12, 2013	**DEVELOPER** Bohemia Interactive
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** arma3.com

My custom campaign involved guiding a civilian through increasingly dangerous warzones.

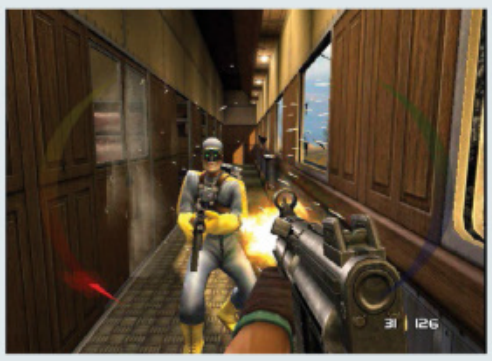
MAP SHAKERS

My personal favourite map editors



FAR CRY 4

The thing *4*'s editor had that made it special was the grappling hook, I brought my preposterous sky pirate missions to life, leaping between airships.

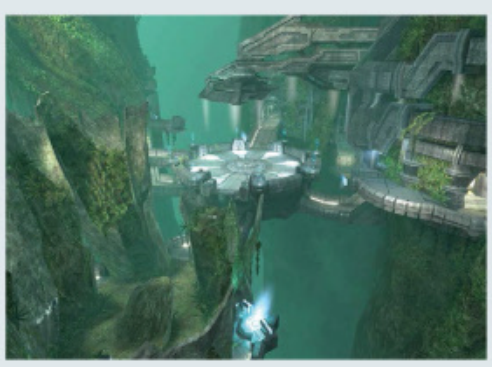


TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT

Not strictly a PC release, but an essential entry in my map editor history. Its simplicity limited its scope but it was still incredibly malleable and permitted enemy patrols and behaviours.

STARCRAFT

The one that started it all. I loved using its RTS sandbox to create what was basically wonky isometric RPG missions. Who needs *Starcraft Ghost* when you can make your own adventure?



HALO 3

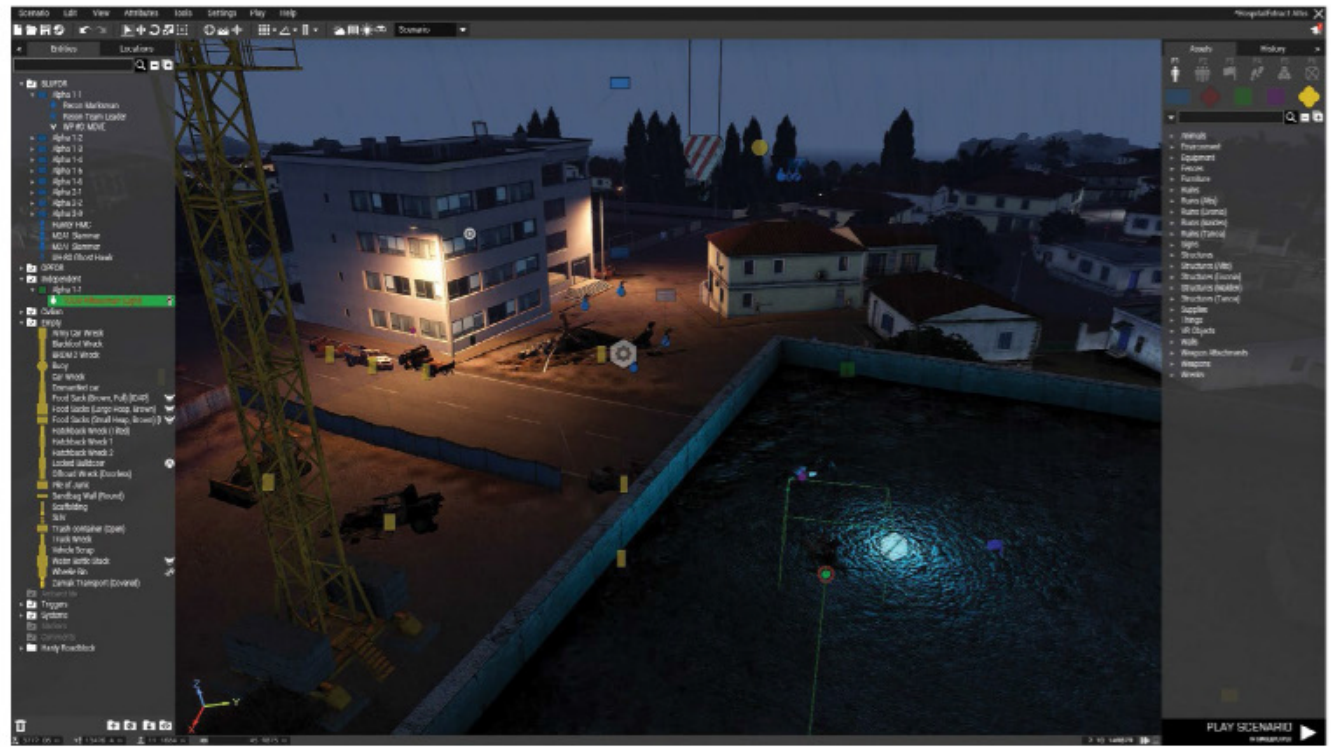
Now on PC, we can all appreciate why this was the mainstay for years among my friends. We broke it with its Forge Mode, making maps with game modes that warped *Halo* into daftness.

some pals, is a great addition even if I've seldom used it myself.

As you would expect its supported by a hefty helping of mods, made all the easier with steam workshop integration. The sheer ease of managing and installing mods now would blow teen me's mind, as she fiddles with zip files and ini files. What mods too. There's a wealth of historical setting, including a surprisingly robust pirate mod depicting Nassau. Naturally you have a Warhammer 40K mod titled *There Is Only War*. Heck, this is where Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene first created their spin on battle royale. I'm really partial to new maps, like Vinjesvingen, which adds a fictional Norwegian landscape full of gorgeous valleys and lakes.

HALO THERE

Perhaps the most notable mod is the full blown *Halo* conversion called *Operation Trebuchet*, for those who want to cast themselves as ODSTs dropping from space or drive around a pelican dropship full of troops. It's extremely impressive, the sheer scale of it alone marking out as a standout mod for any game. The creators are even doing an expansion to bring in the alien Covenant into the game, a



ABOVE: Nothing like a dramatic escape to cap off a mission.

RGHT: *Arma*'s realism makes even the smallest firefight tense as all hell.

FAR RGHT: Deep breath, say it with me, "Get to the choppa!"

game decidedly not built for aliens who shout "Wort! Wort!"

So with all this in the mix, what has been my latest effort? I put together a campaign several missions long, playing as a smuggler sent into a warzone to extract some aid worker with rich parents. Cue lots of sneaking around, getting caught up between clashing armies, and a dramatic run for the last plane in town. All culminating in a showdown in a leaky abandoned hotel, outnumbered and outgunned by some special forces lads lurking around every dark corner, hunting you down. A pretty spooky little finale if I do say so myself. I had a lot of fun conceiving of their little road trip, a little bit *The Last of Us*, a little bit Man on Fire.

CHAOS THEORY

Despite the varied scenarios I put in, the battles are the centrepiece of the whole thing, and showcase a lot of why I enjoy creating in *Arma 3* so much. It's rare to have a game put you in as little more than a cog in the machine, to really provide a sense that there's a whole world turning without you. My biggest mission involves a flight across a city to reach a hospital roof and the helicopter waiting there, for a (doomed) escape. Two armies are fighting, block by block, as you weave through alleyways and crawl under wreckage for cover. Fighting isn't really an option, you're just trying to keep yourself and your ward alive. The game manages all this AI, dozens of individuals and helicopters and vehicles, all battling for control. This isn't a tightly scripted set piece like in *Call of Duty*, this is chaos. No two playthroughs will be the exact same. Little moments that emerge wind up being unique little stories.

I PUT TOGETHER A CAMPAIGN SEVERAL MISSIONS LONG, PLAYING AS A SMUGGLER

Dragging myself under a tiny wall while soldiers pelt it with bullets, slowly advancing until an enemy APC rolls in to draw their attention and gives me a chance to flee. Crawling into a tower to retrieve a sniper rifle so I can take down a distant mortar keeping us pinned down. I put the pieces in place, based on what I think would be interesting, but it's the game which runs a little simulation and produces the moments that make it all worthwhile. That's why it is so viable to just make little missions for myself.

HERE BE DRAGONS

It's a shame then that mission editors are becoming scarce in games. I can't even begin to imagine the reality of getting any big game out the door these days, let alone while trying to include features so few people will touch. There seemed to be so many more, not so long ago. *Far Cry* included one up until recently. *Halo*'s Forge Mode hasn't quite made it to its latest instalment yet, but it has been the source of many, many fun evenings of friends trying out daft maps and modes together. *WarCraft* and *Starcraft*'s map editors have been used to create things outside the realm of the base game's RTS genre.

The value of map editors isn't about teaching people to create content. To me, the best are about allowing folk to make their own fun. In a gaming landscape saturated with battle passes and matchmaking, all prescribing the way to play, I enjoy blowing the dust off my imagination and making things simply for my enjoyment. *Arma 3*, a military simulator of all things, is freeing like no other game out there. ■

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tyler Colp

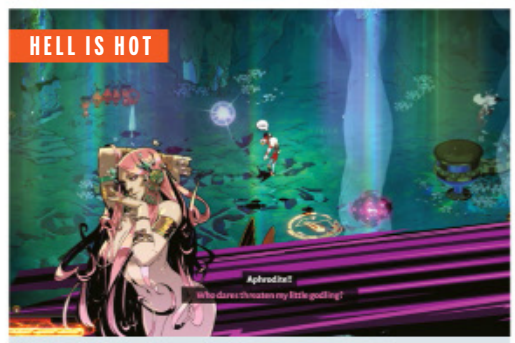
TYLER COLP

I'm tired of people telling me things are 'like *Dark Souls*' when they're absolutely not, so here's some games that have the same tremendous design sensibilities as FromSoftware's series.

CONTROL

controlgame.com

→ The developer behind *Max Payne* made a masterful game where you throw garbage at monsters in a non-euclidean government building as a woman who has seen enough. It's a maze of moody hallways and meeting rooms from hell and yet nothing feels out of place.



HADES

bit.ly/2QL9Wkd

→ Supergiant's expertise led them to create an experience that'll jumpstart your heart rate. It's a roguelike where you're trying to beat up your dad with help from the outrageously sexy people of the underworld. Cleave a hydra in two and date a Fury – you know you want to.

NIER: REPLICANT

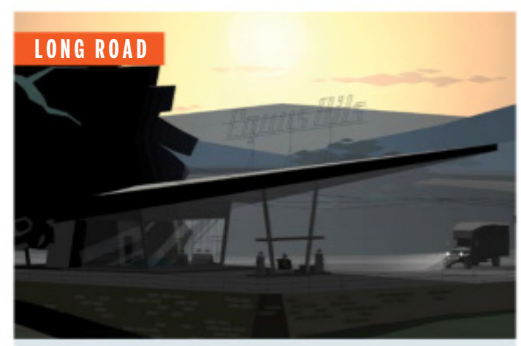
bit.ly/3RGzAl6

→ Nothing is as absurdly tragic as a Yoko Taro game, and *Nier: Replicant* is the perfect showcase of his skills. It's an action game where the action doesn't matter, because it's a found family story featuring a talking book and a lady with a big sword and a bigger mouth.

OUTER WILDS

bit.ly/3x0WZpu

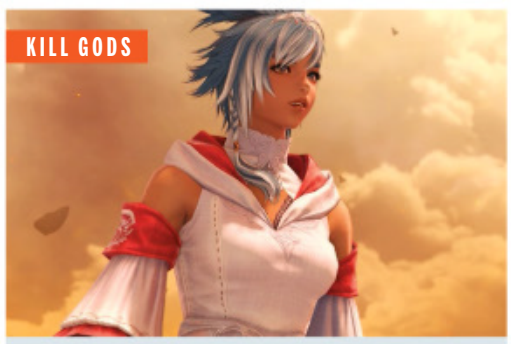
→ The stars and planets are so very far away, but your friends are close in this deeply melancholic first-person puzzle game. Dig deep into the planets and find out who came before you, what went wrong, and what that means for the future of the universe.



KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

kentuckyroutezero.com

→ *Kentucky Route Zero* is a kaleidoscope of America's rot reflected and refracted across the stories of people whose very bodies have been seized by capitalism. If *Dark Souls* is a story about the broken remains of the working class, *KRZ* is about trying to fix them.



FINAL FANTASY XIV

URL: finalfantasyxiv.com

→ A billion catgirls in armour couldn't stop me from yelling about how, despite its massive time investment, *FFXIV* is the only MMO that successfully blends its massive scale with an equally massive story. Once you're in, the sense of ownership in the narrative is hard to shake.

THIRTY FLIGHTS OF LOVING

bit.ly/3BrTTNR

→ If you have 30 minutes to spare, lose yourself in the dizzying love story/spy story of *Thirty Flights of Loving*. This first-person narrative adventure throws you back and forth across a timeline of reality-breaking espionage. The soundtrack totally slaps as well.

UMURANGI GENERATION

URL: bit.ly/3ew8Fdv

→ It's the end of the world. You have a camera and the drive to make your last days on earth count. *Umurangi Generation* is a game where you snapshot the world as it actually is. It's creative, ruthless, and harrowing, a train of emotion barrelling toward the end of the game.

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SINS OF A PC GAMER

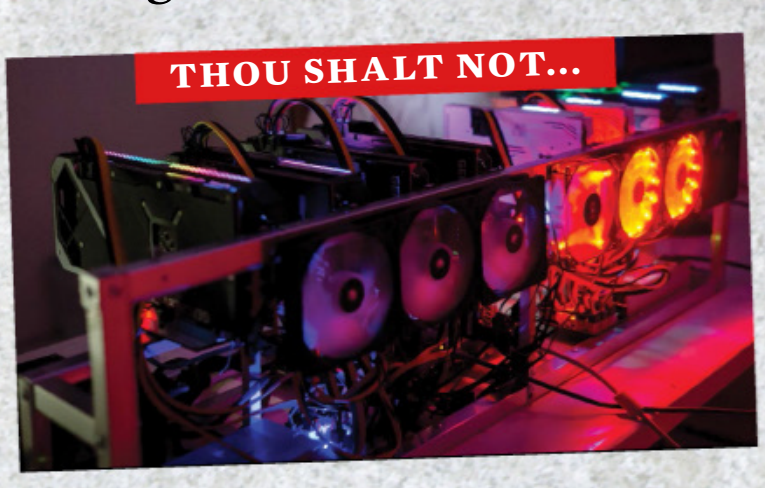
The **WORST CRIMES** you can commit against our fair hobby

THOU SHALT NOT...

Abuse Your USB

You don't properly eject your USBs before you take them out? You know where you're headed.

THOU SHALT NOT...



Mine Crypto

It burns electricity, drives up the price of graphics cards, and makes you annoying on Twitter.

THOU SHALT NOT...

Leave Your PC On

Even in standby mode, it's drawing power! How dare you leave it on all day.

THOU SHALT NOT...

Turn Your PC Off

Turning it off and on a lot is also bad for reasons we're not super clear on.

THOU SHALT NOT...

Have Cheesy Fingers

Just eat snacks with chopsticks. It's the least you can do for your poor mouse and keyboard.

THOU SHALT NOT...

Leave Us Mean Comments

You may think we've delivered the dumbest take you've ever seen, but you don't have to *tell* us.

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